

GOD, LAND, AND THE GREAT FLOOD

*Hearing the Story with
21st-Century Christian Ears*



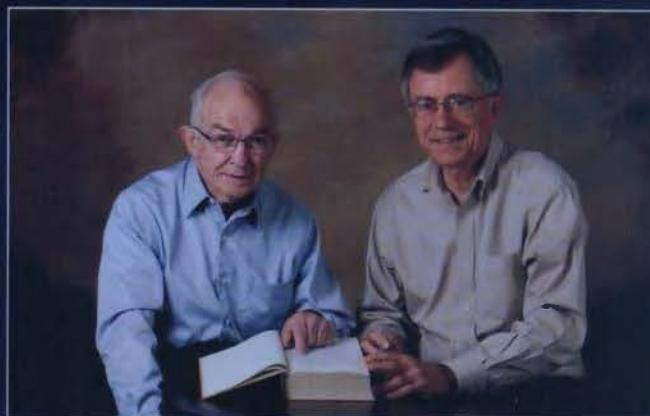
BRIAN BULL & FRITZ GUY

“. . . refreshingly original and long overdue.”

—James L. Hayward

“Guy and Bull have done it again—translating the Flood Story the way it would have been understood by its original hearers!”

—Lawrence T. Geraty, President Emeritus, La Sierra University



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—Lawrence T. Geraty, President Emeritus, La Sierra University

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DEDICATED

*to our grandchildren and their generation,
in the hope that Genesis will bring meaning to them
as it has brought meaning to us and to our generation—
meaning that science is unable to provide.*

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FOREWORD

THE FLOOD NARRATIVE THEN AND NOW

This book has been written with the firm conviction that the authoritative meaning of the Biblical text is the meaning that was communicated when the inspired authors addressed their initial audiences. Since we believe that the authors were guided by the Holy Spirit, we believe that their messages were essentially what God intended for those audiences. Twenty-first-century readers are obviously a different audience, so when we read the Bible today, we are reading messages that were not initially addressed to us. We are, in effect, reading something like a forwarded e-mail that has been transmitted to us down through time.

However, saying that the Bible was originally addressed to others is not at all saying that the Bible was not intended for our benefit. In a very real and profound sense it was written for all humanity, including us; but the authority of the text lies in the God-inspired message that was originally given to a different audience.

The Biblical narrative of the Great Flood was addressed

to ancient Hebrews living in the Land of Promise. It told them why and how an ancient catastrophe occurred, who was affected, and how God graciously acted to guarantee that living things would survive and could thrive. If the authority of that message lies in what it communicated to those who first heard it, then we—prayerfully, thoughtfully, and being responsive to the leading of the Holy Spirit—should determine what meanings, principles, and insights are contained in God’s message to the ancient Hebrews who first heard the message. They took it with utmost seriousness, recorded it, and preserved it—thus making it available to us in very different times, places, and cultures. So we are “listening in” on a conversation between the inspired author and his (but possibly her) original audience.

As we listen in on this ancient conversation, two aspects of our task are crucial for us to keep in mind. First, we must understand what the Hebrew words critical to the conversation actually meant to those who initially heard them. Primacy of place on the list of important words goes to *'erets*, which has usually been translated into English as “land” or “earth” (much less often as “ground,” “territory,” “country,” etc.). However, knowing what a Hebrew word such as *'erets* meant to those who first heard it requires additional information—namely, how that “heard word” was processed. We need to know as far as possible what the original hearers thought about, and how they went about thinking, when they heard *'erets*. Only then will we be able to understand the text correctly. Here an important distinction must be made: for Bible readers in the twenty-first century there is a vast difference between “land” and “earth.” And this is but the first of many distinctions that must be made correctly if we are to truly hear the narrative of the Great Flood as closely as possible to the way the ancient Hebrews heard it.

Determining what the Flood narrative meant to the

ancients is the first step in determining what it should mean to us, so this is where our quest for meaning in the narrative must begin if we truly respect the text. Only after we feel in our bones what the narrative meant to the ancient Hebrews are we in a position to determine what those ancient words should mean to Christians today.

Readers may have already noticed a couple of additional issues to be addressed so that our conversation in this book can proceed with the least confusion between authors and readers. For one thing, just who are the “we” being referred to in any given sentence? Is it the two of us as authors, or all of us as twenty-first-century readers of Scripture? For another thing, when we (the authors) refer to the “ancient Hebrews,” do we mean the author(s) of the Biblical text or those who listened as the narratives were read or recited to them? Both of these issues deserve to be addressed.

In traversing the terrain (Genesis 1:1–2:4b) of our previous book, *God, Sky and Land*,¹ we found it difficult to keep track of multiple speakers, addressing several different listening audiences covering a time span of millennia. Accordingly, in this volume we have recruited two assistants. Both are hypothetical, but both have proved very helpful nonetheless. The first is an ancient Hebrew named Moshe He’eb. Middle-aged and bearded, he carries a rough-hewn staff to assist him as he walks the rugged and dusty paths of the Promised Land. We have also recruited Moshe’s modern counterpart (less strange, but equally hypothetical), a college-educated younger man, clean-shaven and casually dressed. His name is Ian Michael O’Dern, and he is our paradigmatic twenty-first-century Christian. He is an avid reader of the Bible, but since he knows no Hebrew, he uses one or

¹. Brian Bull and Fritz Guy, *God, Sky and Land: Genesis 1 as the Ancient Hebrews Heard It* (Roseville, CA: Adventist Forum, 2011).

more modern English translations and thus represents almost all of us. And if his initials “I. M.” are pronounced together rapidly with his surname “O’Dern,” the result sounds surprisingly like “I’m modern.” These two figures, acting as representatives of their respective times and cultures, will assist us (the authors) in explaining how the concept of *divine action* developed and changed over the hundreds of years that are documented in the Old Testament, as well as in the centuries since.

This book is a sequel to *God, Sky and Land*, which was an attempt to take our readers back into the world of the ancient Hebrews, who experienced the events of Creation as they relived them each time they heard the Creation story. To accomplish this objective, we translated the words of the original Hebrew text into equivalent English language (which we dubbed the Original Hearers Version, or OHV), taking great care to avoid any English words that would lead Ian Michael O’Dern to visualize images and utilize concepts that were simply not available to the ancient, Moshe He’eb.

So in *God, Sky and Land* we translated the Hebrew word *’erets* as “land” rather than “earth,” because the word *earth*, as now heard in a cosmological context, inevitably evokes an image of planet Earth. Ian Michael envisions this because he knows that he lives on a spherical planetary body, the third one of several orbiting a parent star in a sun-centered system. Moshe, on the other hand, representing those who first heard the Genesis story, lived in a totally different world. He lived in a *land*—the “Promised Land,” the “Land of Israel”—under the protection of a divinely created “vault” or “dome.” It appeared to Moshe something like the way the ceiling of a planetarium now appears to Ian Michael’s third-grade son or daughter, and it kept the waters above it from overwhelming the *land* below on which people lived. Moshe’s world was every bit as real to

him as Ian Michael's world is to him (and us). But Ian Michael's world is entirely different. He pictures a blue planet, swathed in clouds, outlined against the blackness of endless space. Unless he recognizes this radical difference between his world and Moshe's, he remains puzzled and confused—as puzzled and confused as he usually is when he accidentally receives someone else's e-mail and reads it without realizing that it wasn't addressed to him in the first place.

Retro-translation is a term we coined for the process of translating an ancient Hebrew text into twenty-first-century English using only English words that do not convey modern images, such as “planet Earth,” and relatively recent understandings, like heliocentrism, universal gravitation, and the hydrologic cycle. The images that could be visualized by those to whom Genesis was first directed—the Original Hearers—undergirded their understanding of who God was, what God did, and what God wanted for them. It is not likely that Ian Michael will completely recover what Moshe envisioned a long time ago and in a faraway land. As he reads the Hebrew Bible, however, Ian Michael can certainly avoid picturing what Moshe could not have pictured. That much is well within his (and our) grasp. The result of retro-translation is a very literal Hebrew-into-English text. The OHV Flood narrative and its resulting implications for important questions—such as the twenty-first-century Christian meaning of the Great Flood—are the subject matter of this book.

However, an OHV that avoids images and concepts that could not have been imagined by Moshe and his contemporaries is but a first step. If Ian Michael is to successfully transport himself and his thinking back into early Old Testament times as much as he can, he needs to examine his own mental concepts with a diligence that he is not likely to have previously invested

in his Bible reading. He must be continually aware that the concepts he regularly uses in reading Genesis in the twenty-first century differ from Moshe's. The first hearers of the Genesis narrative could not imagine a planetary globe, just as they knew nothing about the hydrologic cycle, the solar system, or gravity—concepts that are a necessary part of Ian Michael's pervasive metaconcept *science* (of which the Latin root word *scientia* meant simply “knowing” or “knowledge”).

Nature, *science*, and even *miracle*—concepts central to Ian Michael's twenty-first-century Christian thinking as he contemplates the Great Flood—did not exist for Moshe, and they remained unknown to any human minds for a very long time. So how did Moshe manage to function without the concepts with which Ian Michael understands and explains the various aspects of reality he encounters? What would it have been like to live in Moshe's world, to think his thoughts as he mentally relived the unimaginable disaster of the Great Flood?

The narratives the ancient Hebrews preserved for us speak of a God who acted in the world in ordinary ways most of the time and in extraordinary ways some of the time. God's “ordinary actions” of Moshe's day are now usually included in Ian Michael's modern concept of *nature*. Interestingly, God's “extraordinary actions” are still, even in the twenty-first century, often described (dubiously, depending on one's theology) as “acts of God” if they are horrific occurrences such as tsunamis, or (more reasonably) as “miracles” if they are beneficial and cannot be explained by science. Moshe could only utilize the explanatory concepts he had, and he did not have *nature*, *science*, or *miracle*—explanatory concepts that are quintessential to Ian Michael's understanding of the Flood. Lacking these, Moshe necessarily understood the Flood as God acting “extraordinarily” indeed.

Thus in the Flood narrative the ancient Hebrews heard of an unimaginable catastrophe brought about by God acting in an extraordinary manner in response to pervasive human wickedness. While initially punitive, God ensured the survival of humankind and other forms of life in the end. As Ian Michael processes the same Flood narrative in the twenty-first century, he thinks in scientific terms of *nature's laws*; and for the elements of the narrative for which this approach fails, he, as a Christian, thinks in terms of *miracle*.

The *miracle* option was not available to Moshe simply because the concept of miracle had not yet emerged. It was not that God did not interact with the created world in ways inexplicable by the laws of nature (which is what *miracle* means to Ian Michael). Lacking a concept of nature and nature's laws, Moshe necessarily understood such divine interventions simply as God acting extraordinarily. For Moshe, *miracle* as a special category of divine action was not yet distinguished from all other kinds of divine action.

What, as nearly as we can tell, did the original audience actually hear when listening to an account of the catastrophic Flood? This is the fundamental question. And how did what they heard then compare to what we hear now? As twenty-first-century persons we hear everything differently, for all the reasons cited above. In addition, our hearing as Christians is shaped by our image of God the Father as seen in the life, death, and resurrection of the Son, from whom we take our name and identity. We are, after all, *Christians*. God was described by Jesus as infinite, unending, universal love. And so we hear the Flood narrative with Christian as well as twenty-first-century ears—hence the subtitle of this book. That we hear the story of the Great Flood with Christian ears is, very significantly, *good news*. We explore this important and potentially surprising

outcome in depth in chapters 9 and 10, which address the theology of the Great Flood.

But first, chapter 1 looks at the apparently contradictory instructions to Noah regarding the creatures boarding the ark. Chapter 2 looks at half a dozen particularly important Hebrew words that are often inadvertently mistranslated and/or misunderstood. It offers the Original Hearers Version (OHV) of the two accounts of the Flood that are interwoven in the Biblical narrative. Chapters 3 and 4 investigate Moshe's explanatory concepts and how they differed from Ian Michael's. Chapter 5 takes a longer look at the crucial word '*'rets*', and chapter 6 examines in detail how Noah was to construct the ark in the light of a recently translated cuneiform text that seems to be a millennium older than the account that Moshe heard. Chapter 7 tackles the rarely addressed question of why drawings or other artistic depictions of a "global" flood are well-nigh impossible to produce. As already noted, chapters 8 and 9 address the good news implicit in the Flood narrative. Chapter 10 looks at how the accounts of the Great Flood illuminate the process by which we acquired our Bible and the role that Inspiration plays in undergirding Holy Writ. Chapter 11 takes up the inevitable question of the Flood's extent, whether global or local. Finally, an Afterword offers an account of what we think may have actually happened in the Great Flood, along with a brief evaluation of the supposed disharmony that is thought by many to distance science from religion.

This book explores (and to some extent explains) what the ancient Hebrews likely understood when they heard the Flood narrative. We hope this exploration will provide intellectual and spiritual reassurance for thoughtful Christians who are unable any longer to ignore the abundant, varied, and increasing empirical evidence that runs contrary to traditional

understandings of the ancient texts. We are convinced that most of the difficulties encountered in understanding the Flood narrative are the result of a failure to recognize the conceptual chasm between the ancient world and ours. Too often modern readers assume that the way they understand the Flood's devastation mimics the way the original hearers understood it. We believe that this assumption is wrong and that a better alternative is available.

Overall, this book is intended to make three major points: (1) the Flood narrative was initially composed and understood with only two of the three explanatory concepts with which twenty-first-century readers understand reality; (2) the mistranslation of the crucial Hebrew word '*'erets*' as earth rather than land has led to a pervasive misinterpretation of the narrative; (3) a Christian understanding of the Flood must be guided by the fundamental theological conviction that God is infinite, universal, unending love.



*“The rain fell on the earth forty days and
forty nights.”*

—Gen. 7:12

CHAPTER ONE

SORTING OUT THE FLOOD ACCOUNTS: YHWH AND ELOHIM

At all times and in all places, Christians have been urged to “read the Bible,” for, as the apostle reminded his young colleague Timothy, “the sacred writings . . . are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). This is good counsel. Christian spirituality has waxed when this counsel was taken seriously and waned when it was not.

There is a problem, however. Through the ages, careful readers of the Biblical text have noticed that in a few places, neither the divine advice nor the Biblical narratives are entirely consistent, as the discrepancies among parallel accounts in the Gospels make clear. Compare, for instance, the healing of one blind man in Mark 8:22, 23 with the healing of two blind men in Matthew 9:27, 28. These occasional problems do not undermine the Bible’s central message of God’s infinite love, because the dissonances in the text usually relate to matters peripheral to the authors’ announced intentions. Such instances

are, however, of considerable interest to Biblical scholars, for while the advice given cannot always be literally realized, or the circumstances described be literally harmonized, these passages may be helpful in answering an entirely different question: How did the writings of long ago and far away come to be “Holy Scripture”? Answering this fundamental question promises to help the readers of Scripture understand how the text was written, how it has been preserved, and how it has been translated (literally, “carried across”) from the language in which it was written to a language comprehensible to a reader here and now. Understanding how the original writing came to be Holy Scripture can be immensely valuable in informing—and even transforming—the reader’s spiritual life.

Observant readers of the Biblical narrative of the Great Flood and its immediate aftermath (Gen. 6:5–9:17) notice several prominent characteristics. One of these is frequent repetitions as the story seems to double back on itself (whence the technical term “doublets”). Another characteristic, already noted, is the occurrence of discrepancies, as, for example, in the possibly different instructions to Noah about the number of animals and birds to be taken on board the ark (Gen. 7:2–9).¹ A

1. At one point in the narrative, the *LORD* (*YHWH*) told Noah to take into the ark seven male-and-female pairs of all “clean” animals and all birds, but only one pair of “unclean” animals (Gen. 7:2, 3). A few sentences later, however, it is confirmed that all animals (both clean and unclean) and all birds came to Noah in the ark “two and two, male and female . . . as God [*Elohim*] had commanded Noah” (vv. 7:8, 9). Thus, according to a strictly face-value reading of virtually all English versions of Genesis, there is a clear discrepancy. On the other hand, it is possible that while the reference in the *YHWH* account was concerned with the *numbers* of the various kinds of creatures that were to come into the ark, the reference in the *Elohim* account was concerned only with the order of their entrance into the ark. Interestingly, the Septuagint (third century BCE), which was far closer in time to the original composition of the text than the standardized (Masoretic) Hebrew

third characteristic is the use of each of two divine names—the general Hebrew word for deity, “God” or gods (*Elohim*), and the proper name of the Hebrew God, *YHWH*—in different parts of the narrative. A fourth characteristic is the occurrence of distinctive linguistic expressions, such as “forty days and forty nights” and “birds of the sky,” which occur in association with the proper name *YHWH* but not with the general designation “God” (*Elohim*).

Noting these distinguishing characteristics, readers may have a sense of *déjà vu*, remembering the explanations of Creation that begin the book of Genesis (1:1–2:4a and 2:4b–25). For there, too, repetitions occur—indeed, there are two different accounts of the creation of human beings (Gen. 1:26–30 and 2:4b–25). There are also discrepancies, such as the different order of events in the second narrative (human male, vegetation, animal life, and human female) from that of the first narrative (vegetation, animal life, human male and female). Another difference seems to be the nature of the Creator’s role: in the first narrative the Creator *says* something (“‘Let there be . . . ,’ and thus it came to be”); in the second narrative the Creator *does* something (forms the man “from the dust of the ground,” then takes a rib from the man and makes it into a woman).

In the Creation accounts, as in the Flood account, there are differences in the names of God. The first account always uses the simple generic title “God” (*Elohim*), which functions as a name much like its English equivalent, God; and the second account always includes the proper name *YHWH* in the expression “the LORD God” (*YHWH Elohim*). And there are differences in structure: the first Creation account is in the form

text (tenth century CE), supplied two additional phrases that divided birds (along with animals) into “clean” and “unclean” (7:3)—phrases not found in any surviving Hebrew text.

of “poetic liturgy,”² a hymn to the Creator, with six similarly shaped stanzas followed by a finale; the second account is in the form of a short story, with a setting, a serious problem, and a surprising solution. And yet another, more subtle difference is that too much water is a problem in the first account (it was everywhere), while too little water is a problem in the second (it had not yet rained on the land).

But all the striking similarities between the Creation and Flood narratives do not eclipse a major and significant difference. In the explanations of Creation, a number of factors—the repetitions, discrepancies, different designations of “God,” stylistic distinctions—serve to distinguish two successive narratives; but in the Biblical narrative of the Flood these characteristics occur within what appears to be a single narrative. The actual text, however, shows conclusively that what we have as one narrative is in fact a blending of two originally distinct and complete accounts. Each has an introduction of Noah (Gen. 5:32; 6:9, 10) followed by pre-Flood instructions (vv. 14–21; 7:1–5); a description of the actual Flood (vv. 10–24) and its conclusion (Gen. 8:1–19); Noah’s actions immediately afterward; and the divine promise that the Flood would never be repeated (vv. 20–22; 9:1–17).

The two accounts can be largely sorted out by attending to the characteristics we have noted—repetitions, discrepancies, the divine names, and linguistic style. We have used three specific conventions to separate the accounts as follows:

- The entire Flood story appears in both the left and right columns. In the left column, parts of the narrative that refer to “the L ORD” (*YHWH*) have no shading and parts

2. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 73.

that refer to “God” (*Elohim*) have dark shading. In the right column, parts of the narrative that refer to “the LORD” (*YHWH*) have dark shading and parts that refer to “God” (*Elohim*) have no shading. The word *LORD* is presented in the traditional small capitals followed by *YHWH* (in parentheses) to enable the reader to pick it out readily.

- The LORD (*YHWH*) account refers distinctively to “birds of the air,” to “the face of the ground,” to “seven days,” and to “forty days and forty nights” (Gen. 7:3, 4). Because these references are closely associated with “the LORD” (*YHWH*) (v. 1), the sections of the narrative that use these phrases or time periods are assigned to the LORD (*YHWH*) account, while other ways of referring to birds and soil and other time periods are assigned to the God (*Elohim*) account.
- One brief part of the narrative (vv. 18–22) has none of these identifying features. For this reason and because we are not attempting a precise separation of the accounts (interested Hebrew scholars will surely continue their century-long discussion of this point), we have included this section in both accounts. These verses do not affect the narrative flow of either account.

We have identified the accounts by the two divine names, “the LORD” (*YHWH*) and “God” (*Elohim*), because this is the simplest and most obvious difference. In order to show that this sorting is not at all dependent on our Original Hearers Version (OHV), we have used the version most widely used by Biblical scholars, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), indicating the divine names “the LORD” (*YHWH*) and “God” (*Elohim*) wherever they occur. For readers who

would like to read each account in unbroken sequence, we suggest turning to the OHV translations in chapter 2.

Sorting out the two accounts explains to some extent Noah's conflicting sets of instructions: "God" (*Elohim*) tells him to take two (a male and a female) of each kind of bird while "the LORD" (*YHWH*) insists that he take fourteen (seven pairs). Thus, separating the accounts means that Noah no longer has the numerical problem with which this chapter began (he is to take either one pair of birds or seven pairs onto the ark).

Separating the accounts also allows us to address a problem of which the reader may not be aware. The Flood narrative as presently preserved in all translations of our Bible gives an incongruent and unusual detail about what followed after the second time Noah's entry into the ark is described. The text says that "those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God [*Elohim*] had commanded him [Noah], and the LORD [*YHWH*] shut him in" (v. 16). This awkwardness in the text is readily eliminated by taking the phrase "and the LORD [*YHWH*] shut him in" (v. 5) and relocating it from the second to the first description of Noah loading the ark. Thus, "Noah did all that the LORD [*YHWH*] had commanded him" (v. 5), "and the LORD [*YHWH*] shut him in" (v. 16). We have made this change in the OHV translations in chapter 2, and it is the only change that alters in any way the sequence of the Hebrew words. This unusual and isolated need for textual emendation underscores the skill of the (putative) redactor(s) who melded the two accounts into a single narrative.

In a later chapter we will note the contribution of the OHV to a more adequate understanding of the Genesis narrative of the Great Flood. On the following pages we simply illustrate the process of sorting out the respective accounts by highlighting each one in identical parallel columns taken directly from the NRSV.

THE “LORD [*YHWH*]”
ACCOUNT (NRSV)

^{5:32} After Noah was five hundred years old, Noah became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth. ^{6:1} When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, ² the sons of God [*Elohim*] saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose.

³ Then the LORD [*YHWH*] said, “My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years.”

⁴ The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.

⁵ The LORD [*YHWH*] saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. ⁶ And the LORD [*YHWH*] was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. ⁷ So the LORD [*YHWH*] said, “I will blot out

THE “GOD [*ELOHIM*]”
ACCOUNT (NRSV)

^{5:32} After Noah was five hundred years old, Noah became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth. ^{6:1} When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, ² the sons of God [*Elohim*] saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose.

³ Then the LORD [*YHWH*] said, “My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years.”

⁴ The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.

⁵ The LORD [*YHWH*] saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. ⁶ And the LORD [*YHWH*] was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. ⁷ So the LORD [*YHWH*] said, “I will blot out

from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” ⁸But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD [YHWH].

⁹These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God [Elohim]. ¹⁰And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

¹¹Now the earth was corrupt in God’s [Elohim’s] sight, and the earth was filled with violence. ¹²And God [Elohim] saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.

¹³And God [Elohim] said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.

¹⁴Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. ¹⁵This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. ¹⁶Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and

from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” ⁸But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD [YHWH].

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put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks.

⁷For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. ⁸But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. ⁹And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. ¹⁰Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive.

¹¹Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them.”

¹²Noah did this; he did all that God [*Elohim*] commanded him.

¹³Then the LORD [*YHWH*] said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. ¹⁴Take with you seven

put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks.

⁷For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. ⁸But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. ⁹And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. ¹⁰Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive.

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¹³Then the LORD [*YHWH*] said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. ¹⁴Take with you seven

pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; ³and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth. ⁴For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.” ⁵And Noah did all that the **LORD** [*YHWH*] had commanded him.

⁶Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came on the earth.⁷ And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood.

⁸Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground, ⁹two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God [*Elohim*] had commanded Noah.

¹⁰And after seven days the waters of the flood came on the earth.

¹¹In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the

pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; ³and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth. ⁴For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.” ⁵And Noah did all that the **LORD** [*YHWH*] had commanded him.

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¹¹In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the

heavens were opened.

¹²The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.

¹³On the very same day Noah with his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons entered the ark, ¹⁴they and every wild animal of every kind, and all domestic animals of every kind, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every bird of every kind—every bird, every winged creature. ¹⁵They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life. ¹⁶And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God [Elohim] had commanded him.

And the LORD [YHWH] shut him in. [Gen 7:5b.] ¹⁷The flood continued forty days on the earth.

^{17b}The waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. ¹⁸The waters swelled and increased greatly on the earth; and the ark floated on the face of the waters. ¹⁹The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered; ²⁰the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep.

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²¹And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings.

²²Everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. ²³He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark.

²⁴And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days.

^{8:1}But [And] God [*Elohim*] remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God [*Elohim*] made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; ²the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, ³and the waters gradually receded from the earth. At the end of one hundred fifty days the waters had abated; ⁴and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat.

⁵The waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the

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⁵The waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the

tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains appeared.

⁶At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made ⁷and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth.

⁸Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; ⁹but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. ¹⁰He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; ¹¹and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. ¹²Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more.

¹³In the six hundred first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth;

and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying.

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¹³In the six hundred first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth;

and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying.

¹⁷In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. ¹⁸Then God [Elohim] said to Noah, ¹⁹"Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. ²⁰Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth."

²¹So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. ²²And every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families.

²³Then Noah built an altar to the **LORD** [*YHWH*], and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. ²⁴And when the **LORD** [*YHWH*] smelled the pleasing odor, the **LORD** [*YHWH*] said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. ²⁵As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer

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and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

⁹"God [*Elohim*] blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. ¹⁰The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. ¹¹Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. ¹²Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. ¹³For your own lifeblood I will surely require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life. ¹⁴Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God [*Elohim*] made humankind. ¹⁵And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it. ¹⁶Then God [*Elohim*] said to Noah and to his sons with him, ¹⁷"As for me I am establishing my covenant with you ¹⁸and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark ¹⁹I establish my

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covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

"God [*Elohim*] said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you for all future generations: "I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. "When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, "I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. "When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." "God [*Elohim*] said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

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"God [*Elohim*] said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you for all future generations: "I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. "When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, "I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. "When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." "God [*Elohim*] said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

CHAPTER TWO

HEBREW AND ENGLISH WORDS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

HOW TRANSLATORS' CHOICES AFFECT THE NARRATIVE

How might the Flood narrative read if the translators had chosen other English words—other, perfectly legitimate words that better convey what the Hebrew words mean? We will do a few “what ifs,” choosing alternative English words that will avoid evoking in the minds of twenty-first-century readers any concepts that could not have been in the minds of the first Hebrew audience because those concepts did not exist (in most cases) until hundreds of years later.

'erets: land, earth, country, ground, territory. To translate *'erets* as “earth” is to mislead the modern-day reader into thinking of planet Earth, for that is what the word *earth* inevitably evokes in us in a cosmological context. “Land”—the most frequently used English equivalent for *'erets*—is much less likely to mislead. This, however, is not merely land as real

estate but also (and often) land as in “promised land” or “land of Israel.” (*'Erets Israel* is now the state of Israel.)

'Erets meant “land,” not “earth,” and emphatically not “planet Earth.”

shamayim: heaven, sky, visible heavens, realm of the stars. Although *shamayim* is technically a dual form, its meaning is singular (compare “mathematics” in English)—as reflected in the Greek Septuagint, which uses the singular form *ouranos*. Until the time of the Reformers, *shamayim* meant the visible dome of the sky in which the sun was embedded. That dome carried the sun by day and the moon and stars by night. For us, however, “heaven” often means “cosmos” or the astronomical universe. Since neither the author(s) of Genesis nor any other human beings up to and beyond Luther and Melanchthon were aware of what we mean by “universe,” it would seem prudent to select another word from the list above or elsewhere. We propose “sky,” since that is what the ancient Hebrews—those who first listened to the Genesis narrative—could see, and what the word *shamayim* evoked.

Shamayim meant “sky,” not “starry heavens,” and certainly not “universe.”

ma'eyenoth: fountains, springs, wells, torrential outpourings. Although this Hebrew word is translated “springs” or “fountains” elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, in no other place is it coupled with *tehom*, the great abyss, the primordial ocean that existed before Creation and was one of the two sources from which the flood waters came (Gen. 7:11). A dramatic English rendering seems appropriate; hence our “torrential outpourings.”

Ma'eyenoth meant “torrential outpourings,” not “fountains.”

'arubboth: cataracts, floodgates, sluice gates, windows.

This Hebrew word was joined with *shamayim*, “sky” in the phrase “floodgates of the sky.” Whatever these entities were, they were opened by God at the start of the *Elohim* account of the Flood and were closed by God at its conclusion (Gen. 7:11; 8:2). They were not mentioned in the *YHWH* account, which simply said that it rained “forty days and forty nights” (Gen. 7:12). The same phrase occurred again in a description of the desolation that would confront those who fled from divine judgment (Isa. 24:18), and in a reference to God’s blessing upon those who would pay a faithful tithe (Mal. 3:10). The latter two instances were obvious metaphors. Here they are likely entities that were really thought to exist and have the potential of disgorging a Deluge.

'Arubboth meant “floodgates,” not “windows.”

behemah: domestic animal, farm animal, herd animal.

Noah was instructed to save animals and birds from the waters of the Flood (Gen. 7:2, 3), but what kinds of animals? One Hebrew word, *chayyah* (“beast”) refers to wild animals. In Genesis, *behemah* refers to a domestic or farm animal. “Farm animal” seems more appropriate because the term as used elsewhere includes beasts of burden in addition to cattle, sheep, and goats. The word is sometimes translated as “herd animal,” which, while not incorrect, blurs the distinction between wild and farm animals, because some wild animals, such as zebras, are also herd animals. The semantic difference is clear earlier in Genesis, when God created “all kinds of living creatures—farm animals, crawling things, and wild animals” (Gen. 1:24, OHV) and Adam subsequently named them (Gen. 2:20).

Behemah meant “farm animal” or “domestic animal,” not “beast.”

TRANSLATING “BACKWARDS”

The translations that follow are our own. They are very literal translations in the sense that every Hebrew word is rendered into English. In the few instances where additional words have been supplied to translate a Hebrew word for which no single English word is adequate, the supplied words have been placed within square brackets.

Because these translations make every effort to avoid English words that evoke pictures or concepts that were unavailable to the first Hebrew audience of Genesis, we have called them *retro-translations*. This is our attempt to transport Ian Michael back to the thought patterns and concepts of Moshe, avoiding words that would likely create mental pictures we know Moshe could not have conceived. For example, the ancients could not have pictured '*erets* as a blue globe, swathed in clouds against the blackness of space, nor could they have imagined it orbiting the sun.

The English equivalents of the Hebrew words defined and translated above will be italicized in our retro-translation. For similar reasons we have italicized phrases that are characteristic of the LORD (*YHWH*) account and the God (*Elohim*) account. This will invite the reader to experience the pivotal role of these words in the narrative. Note that in order to reflect the original LORD (*YHWH*) account, we have omitted interspersed verses that belong to the God (*Elohim*) account, which follows.

THE LORD (*YHWH*) ACCOUNT OF THE FLOOD AS A RETRO-TRANSLATION

^{5:32} After Noah was five hundred years old, he fathered Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

^{6:1}When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, ²Elohim's sons saw that they were beautiful, so they took wives for themselves of whomever they chose. ³Then the L ORD [YHWH] said, “My spirit will not abide in humans indefinitely, for they are flesh; let their days be one hundred twenty years.” ⁴The Nephilim were in the *land* in those days—and also afterward—when Elohim's sons mated with the women, who bore them children. These were the heroes of old, warriors of renown.

^{6:5}The L ORD [YHWH] saw that the wickedness of the humans was great in the *land*, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil all the time. ⁶The L ORD [YHWH] was sorry that he had made humankind on the *land*, and it pained his heart. ⁷So the L ORD [YHWH] said, “I will eliminate from the ground the human beings I have created—the people along with animals and creeping things and *birds of the sky*,¹ for I am sorry that I have made them.” ⁸But Noah found favor in the eyes of the L ORD [YHWH].

^{7:1}Then the L ORD [YHWH] told Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone in this generation are righteous before me. ²Take with you seven pairs of all the [ritually] clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; ³and seven pairs of the *birds of the sky* also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the *land*. ⁴For in *seven days* I will send rain on the *land* for *forty days and forty nights*; and every living thing that I have made I will erase from the *face of the ground*.² ⁵And Noah did everything that

1. The L ORD (YHWH) account used the phrase “birds of the sky” three times (6:7; 7:3, 23).

2. The L ORD (YHWH) account used the phrase “the face of the ground” four times (7:4, 23; 8:8, 12).

the LORD [YHWH] had commanded him . . . ⁷⁶and the LORD [YHWH] shut him in.

⁷⁶And after seven days the water of the flood came on the *land*. ⁷⁷The rain fell on the *land forty days and forty nights*. ⁷⁸The flood continued *forty days* on the *land*; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the *land*. ⁷⁹The water rose and increased greatly on the *land*; and the ark floated on the surface of the water. ⁸⁰The water rose so much on the *land* that all the high mountains under the whole *sky* were covered; ⁸¹the water rose above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep. ⁸²Everything on dry *land* in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. ⁸³He blotted out everything alive on the *face of the ground*—human beings and animals and creeping things and *birds of the sky*; they were blotted out from the *land*. Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark.

⁸⁴At the end of *forty days* Noah opened the window of the ark he had made . . . ⁸⁵and sent out a dove to see if the water had subsided from the *face of the ground*; ⁸⁶but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the water was still on the surface of all the *land*. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. ⁸⁷He waited another *seven days*, and again sent out the dove from the ark; ⁸⁸and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the *land*. ⁸⁹Then he waited another *seven days*, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him anymore. ⁹⁰Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the *face of the ground* was firm.

⁹¹Noah built an altar to the LORD (YHWH) and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. ⁹²And when the LORD (YHWH) smelled the pleasing aroma, he said in his heart, “I will never curse the

ground again because of humanity, because the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

²²As long as the *land* endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night,
shall not cease.”

THE GOD (*ELOHIM*) ACCOUNT OF THE FLOOD AS A RETRO-TRANSLATION

^{6:9}These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God [*Elohim*].

¹⁰And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

¹¹Now the *land* had become corrupt in God’s [*Elohim’s*] sight, and the *land* was filled with violence. ¹²And God [*Elohim*] saw that the *land* had become corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways on the *land*. ¹³And God [*Elohim*] said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the *land* is filled with violence because of them. I am going to destroy them along with the *land*. ¹⁴Make yourself an ark of *gofer* wood, with reeds make the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. ¹⁵This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. ¹⁶Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks. ¹⁷For my part, I am going to bring a flood of water on the *land*, to destroy from under the *sky* all flesh in which is the breath of life. Everything that is on the *land* will die. ¹⁸But I will establish my covenant with you; and you are to come into the ark—you, your sons, your wife, and your

sons' wives with you. ¹⁹And of every living thing, of all flesh, you are to bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you—they are to be male and female. ²⁰Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the *farm animals*³ according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind—two of every kind shall come in to you—to keep them alive. ²¹Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it is to be food for you and for them.” ²²Noah did this; he did all that God [*Elohim*] commanded him.

^{7:6} Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of water came on the *land*.⁷ And Noah, with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives, went into the ark ahead of the waters of the flood. ⁸Of clean animals, and of animals that were not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground, ⁹two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God [*Elohim*] had commanded Noah.

¹⁰In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month—on that day all the *torrential outpourings* of the *primeval waters* burst forth, and the *floodgates* of the *sky* were opened. ¹¹On the very same day Noah with his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons entered the ark—¹²they and wild animals of every kind, and *farm animals* of every kind, and every kind of creeping thing that creeps on the

3. “Farm animals” (*behemeth*, plural of *behemah*) instead of “domestic animals” because the latter in modern English often includes pets (cats, dogs, etc.). This would have been an unlikely inclusion for Moshe—he would have considered them ritually unclean. In addition, in common usage, “farm animals” includes beasts of burden—oxen, horses, and the like.

The God (*Elohim*) account employed the characteristic designation “farm animals” four times (6:20; 7:14, 21; 8:1) and referred to the ark's avian passengers eight times simply as “birds” (6:20; 7:8, 14 [twice], 21; 8:17, 19; 9:10) rather than “birds of the sky” (see above, note 2).

land, and every bird of every kind—every bird, every winged creature. ¹⁵They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life. ¹⁶And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God [*Elohim*] had commanded. . . .

¹⁸The water rose and increased greatly on the *land*, so that the ark floated on the surface of the water. ¹⁹The water swelled so mightily on the *land* that all the high mountains under the whole *sky* were covered; ²⁰the water swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep. ²¹And all flesh died that moved on the *land*—birds, *farm animals*, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the *land*, and all human beings. ²⁴And the waters rose on the *land* for one hundred fifty days.

^{8:1}And God [*Elohim*] remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the *farm animals* that were with him in the ark. And God [*Elohim*] made a wind blow over the *land*, so that the waters subsided. ²The *torrential outpourings* of the *primeval waters* and the *floodgates* of the *sky* were closed, the rain from the *sky* was held back, ³and the water coursed back and forth as it gradually receded from the *land*. At the end of one hundred fifty days the water abated; ⁴and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. ⁵The water continued to recede until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains appeared, . . . ⁷and he sent out a raven; and it coursed back and forth until the water was dried up from the *land*.

¹³In [Noah's] six-hundred-and-first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the water was dried up from the *land*. ¹⁴In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the *land* was dry. ¹⁵Then God [*Elohim*] said to Noah, ¹⁶"Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your

sons' wives with you.¹⁷ Take out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the *land*—so they may abound on the *land*, and be fruitful and multiply on the *land*.¹⁸ So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives.¹⁹ And every *farm animal*, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the *land*, went out of the ark by families.

^{9:} God [*Elohim*] blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the *land*.² The fear and dread of you will rest on every animal of the *land*, and on every bird of the *sky*, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. ³ Every moving thing that lives will be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. ⁴ Only, you must not eat meat with its life, that is, its blood. ⁵ For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life.

“Whoever sheds the blood of a human,
by a human that person's blood shall be shed;
for in his own image
God [*Elohim*] made humankind.

⁷ And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the *land*, and multiply in it.”

⁸ Then God [*Elohim*] said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you,¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you—the birds, the farm animals and every animal of the *land* with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹ I am establishing my covenant with you, that never again will all flesh be cut off by the waters of a Flood, and never again will there be a Flood to destroy the *land*.¹² ”

¹²God [*Elohim*] said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and the *land*. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the *land* and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters will never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God [*Elohim*] and every living creature of all flesh that is on the *land*.” ¹⁷God [*Elohim*] said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the *land*.”



“And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark.”

—Gen. 6:19

CHAPTER THREE

AN ANCIENT HEBREW UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT GOD DOES

EXPLANATORY CONCEPTS OF THE ANCIENT HEBREWS

It is characteristic of human nature to want to understand and explain things. We are driven to provide some sort of explanation for everything that exists and everything that happens. What is not so obvious is that certain concepts—namely, *explanatory concepts*—are the tools we use in the process of explaining. These concepts help to provide answers to questions such as, Why is there something rather than nothing? And how does that something work?

We humans have always used explanatory concepts. From the first accounts of the existence of the world and its inhabitants to our modern accounts of earthquakes and epidemics, explanatory concepts have always helped us account for both epochal and ordinary events—and in the course of time these concepts have changed. Because they are the tools

with which we think, our thinking processes have inevitably changed too. As explanatory concepts have changed, they have usually become more sophisticated and more powerful, capable of explaining many more things more adequately. Still, in both ancient and modern times these concepts have always “covered the waterfront.” That is, the explanatory concepts in the human mental toolkit have always been adequate to their assigned task—explaining why the things that exist, *exist*, and why the things that happen, *happen*.

It is very difficult for us to step back and think about explanatory concepts precisely because they are the tools with which we think, and they therefore function “behind the scenes.” Thinking about one’s own thinking is never easy, and it is rarely even attempted. But if we are to make progress in understanding the accounts of the Great Flood, we have to think about *how* we think about it; and, equally important, we have to think about how the ancient Hebrews thought—those who composed, listened to, and preserved the accounts.

The Flood accounts require a great deal of effort on the part of the modern reader—and not just because of Noah’s numerical dilemma about how many birds of the sky he was to take on board the ark (Gen. 6:19, 20; 7:2, 3). A much more significant issue is the very large difference between the ancient explanatory concepts and ours. Because our explanatory concepts fundamentally differ, we hear a markedly different account than what the ancient Hebrews heard. As a consequence, the Great Flood that we picture is very different from the disaster that is actually described.

As we explore the fundamental role played by the ancient Hebrew understanding of physical reality¹ in the

i. See, for example, the perspectives of John H. Walton, chapter 7, “Cosmos,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*:

Genesis accounts of the Flood, we will be dealing often with explanatory concepts. For convenience and verbal economy, for the rest of this book we will refer to explanatory concepts as “explanacepts.” Any explanacept that accounts for some portion of physical reality coexists with all the other explanacepts with which a person understands physical reality. Because humans at all times and in all places are unable to do otherwise, these explanacepts, functioning together, provide explanations for all of physical reality and thus determine how it is understood. Each person’s set of explanacepts is a complete but limited package; what one explanacept doesn’t cover, another one does, and in concert they cover everything. So as a new explanacept emerges, or an existing explanacept changes over time, the whole set is necessarily affected, and all the explanacepts change accordingly. Especially relevant to the difference between the way the ancient Hebrews—Moshe and his kin—heard the Flood accounts and the way Ian Michael, and we, hear them in the twenty-first century is the fact that one of our modern explanacepts simply did not exist in ancient times, and when it emerged, the other explanacepts changed to accommodate its arrival.

A couple of examples may help. Let us try to strip our minds of our twenty-first-century explanacepts and think temporarily with only the explanacepts available to a group of Hebrew slaves fleeing from Egypt. Judging from the reports of their journey in the Biblical books of Exodus and Numbers, they had a package of only two explanacepts with which

Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 165–99; John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013); and Kyle Greenwood, *Scripture and Cosmology: Reading the Bible Between the Ancient World and Modern Science* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

to process everything they saw, heard, and felt; everything that happened was the result either of *human actions* or of *divine actions*. The latter category obviously included the actions ascribed to God and/or gods to the extent that the latter are recognized in the Hebrew Bible. Their limited package necessarily accounted for all their physical reality; the two explanacepts dealt effectively and adequately with everything that existed or happened. That was the extent of the explanatory toolkit at the time of the Exodus.

Evidence for this claim is in the Biblical narrative: “That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning, there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor” (Exod. 16:13, 14, NIV). The fleeing Hebrews had grumbled about the lack of food in the desert (vv. 2, 3), and Moses and Aaron told them that the LORD (*YHWH*) had heard their complaints and would shortly send them both meat and bread (vv. 9–12). That evening, quail came and covered the camp, and the next morning, manna appeared on the ground around the camp. There was no reference to a *natural order* (natural regularities² described in the laws of nature). God acted, and the Hebrews were provided with both meat and bread.

Fast forward to two and a half years later. “Now a wind went out from the LORD (*YHWH*) and drove in quail from the sea. It scattered them two cubits deep all around the camp, as far as a day’s walk in any direction. All that day and night and all the next day the people went out and gathered quail. No one gathered less

2. In this book the term *natural regularities* refers to the entities and interactions that constitute physical reality – matter, energy, space, and time. These entities constitute subject matter of the natural sciences, and their interactions are commonly referred to as the “laws of nature.”

than ten homers. . . . But while the meat was still between their teeth, and before it could be consumed, the anger of the LORD (*YHWH*) burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague” (Num. 11:31–33, NIV). As before, *YHWH* received the credit for sending the quail, but now the fleeing slaves had a problem. A God who answered prayer for meat by sending quail was very much in harmony with a “providential God” explanacept that was developing in the Hebrew consciousness. It fitted in well with their growing understanding of *divine actions*. But a God who sent quail a second time and rendered them lethally toxic seriously complicated that developing “God” explanacept, rendering it almost hopelessly incoherent.

The Hebrews had only one way out of their theological dilemma. They called on their other explanacept, *human actions*, and understood the event as the result of a divine reaction—the LORD’s (*YHWH*’s) anger in response to inappropriate human actions (“craving”). “Therefore the place was named Kibroth Hattaavah [“Graves of Craving”], because there they buried the people who had craved other food” (v. 34, NIV). Grumbling about food—craving something other than what was available—was, of course, something they had probably done many times before. They may well have done it on the previous occasion involving quail, when they had complained to Moses, for he responded by confirming that God had heard their complaint and would shortly send them both meat and bread. Still, with their two available explanacepts, they could only conclude that the visitation of death was due to something they had done to anger the LORD (*YHWH*) on the later occasion. Thus the location and the event associated with it went down in Hebrew history as Kibroth Hattaavah, the burial place of people who had improperly craved food. What else could they do? As yet, this newborn nation had no explanacept of *natural*

regularities, and so without further ado they created a class of events, a category of non-manne-made disasters still known today as “acts of God.” This category remains enshrined in our legal language; even though most people (including most Christians) have moved horrific catastrophes to the more recently developed explanacept of *natural events*, our legal language has not yet completely caught up with this change in our package of explanacepts.

As a result of this reassignment of some of what happens from *divine actions* to *natural events*, we respond differently. Our minds are now equipped with additional possibilities, which, had they been accessible to the puzzled Hebrew former slaves, would have saved the day and given them a coherent understanding of an ethical, benevolent, monotheistic Deity. The possibility available to us now, but not to them then, is the result of the explanacept *natural regularities*—an explanacept that is investigated, refined, and explicated by science.

If we were part of a group traveling through a desert and some members of our group died after consuming a previously good-to-eat food like quail meat, we would immediately wonder why quail were perfectly good and nutritious sometimes and lethally toxic at other times. Most of us would not think of attributing the lethal toxicity to God, and we would certainly not place the consequences in the legal category of “acts of God.” Instead, we would likely check Wikipedia or (hopefully) the relevant scientific literature.

If we checked the scientific literature, we would discover that as flocks of European migratory quail cross the Mediterranean in the autumn en route to their winter home in sub-Saharan Africa, individual birds, or perhaps a portion of a flock, may stop for several days to feed in the Greek islands that surround and include the island of Lesbos. If the quail happen to stop

over in mid-September, they are likely to gorge themselves on the ripe seeds of a plant commonly known as red hemp-nettle (*Galeopsis ladanum*). The seeds contain an alkaloid that is harmless to the muscles of birds but highly toxic to the muscles of mammals. The poisonous alkaloid causes mammalian muscle cells to dissolve and discharge their contents (myoglobin) into the bloodstream. If it is present in the blood in large enough amounts, myoglobin plugs the kidney tubules, and when the amount of quail meat consumed is large and renal dialysis is not available, this damage to the kidneys is almost always fatal. Quail still migrate in the fall of the year and are sometimes still toxic to the people along their migration route who kill them for food.³ Now, however, most of the people along that route know to avoid them at the critical time in autumn, and for those unlucky ones who still manage to kill and eat a toxic quail, life-saving renal dialysis is available at a hospital.

Our modern assessment of the event is inevitably quite different from that of the ancient Hebrews because we think about it differently. Our conceptual toolkit is a wider suite of somewhat more nuanced explanacepts. In addition to the categories of *human actions* and of *divine actions* (which for us sometimes partially merges with the category of *miracle*), we have the huge realm of *natural regularities* (the domain of scientific research and understanding), the much more limited realm of *miracle* (the extraordinary activity of God, as distinct from God's constant activity), and the murkier realm of *randomness* (commonly but imprecisely known as *chance*).

The Genesis accounts of the Flood may well be earlier than the Exodus and Numbers accounts of the quail.⁴ If, by

3. A. G. Billis et al., “Acute Renal Failure After a Meal of Quail,” *The Lancet* 298, no. 7726 (Sept. 25, 1971), 702.

4. Whenever the Flood event occurred, it certainly preceded the escape

the time of Moses, the conceptual toolkit of the Hebrews was still equipped with only the explanacepts of *human actions* and *divine actions*, it is entirely reasonable that we should hear the Flood accounts that come from a still earlier period of Hebrew prehistory with only the same two explanacepts in mind. It will, however, be helpful to slightly expand both explanacepts before we attempt to hear the Flood accounts as they were probably heard originally. *Divine actions* as already noted included actions of other gods, angels, and demons. Similarly, *human actions* included the actions of nonhuman animals; indeed, it appears that the Hebrews extended it to all creatures.

The very literal English translation of Genesis 5:32–9:17 (OHV) that we provided in chapter 2 is intended to aid in the task of hearing the Flood accounts as they were originally meant and heard. It removes from the translation any English words that might evoke mental pictures that were unavailable, and therefore would have been incomprehensible, to the original Hebrew audience. The OHV, however, is not enough by itself. Unless we twenty-first-century readers are also able and willing to clear our minds of the explanacept *natural regularities* (including *miracle* and *randomness*), we will still not hear or understand the Flood accounts as they were originally meant and understood. Why should we hear them that way? Because that is where the *authority* of the text resides; it resides in the meaning conveyed to the original audience by the original inspired author of the Biblical text. So we begin the pursuit of our goal—to hear *now* what *they* heard *then*—with a careful and thoughtful reading of the *YHWH* account of the Flood. We will follow that with a similar reading of the *Elohim* account.

from Egypt, which the Merneptah stele confirms had taken place by 1200 BCE.

THE TWO EXPLANACEPTS IN THE *YHWH* ACCOUNT

Our discussion of each of the two Flood accounts will be introduced by a presentation of the relevant text followed by a tabular listing of the phrases where each of the two available explanacepts is invoked. The reader may wish to glance first at the bold type to see what will be called out in the tabular listing that follows. This will make it possible to preview how each explanacept functions in the narrative.

^{5:32} After **Noah** was five hundred years old, he **fathered** Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

^{6:1} When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, **the sons-of-God [Elohim]** **saw** that they were beautiful, **so they took** wives for themselves of whomever **they chose**.³ Then **YHWH said**, “My spirit will not abide in humans indefinitely, for they are flesh; **let their days be** one hundred twenty years.”⁴ The Nephilim were in the land in those days—and also afterward—when the **sons of God [Elohim]** **mated** with the **women**, who **bore** them **children**. These were the heroes of old, warriors of renown.

In some ways the most puzzling part of the entire Flood narrative occurs at the very beginning (even before the description of the actual Flood). Genesis 6:1–4 refers to “the sons-of-God” mating with the “daughters of humans.” The principal issue here is the identity of the “sons of God.” This has been a source of controversy among Christians since the early centuries CE. Clement of Alexandria (*ca.* 150–*ca.* 215) saw the “sons of God” as fallen angels, who forsook the eternal beauty of God for the perishing beauty of human women. On the other

hand, a century and a half later, Ephrem the Syrian (*ca.* 306–373) believed that the “sons of God” were descendants of Seth and the “daughters of humans” were descendants of Cain. Some Jewish interpreters have suggested that the “sons of God” were especially gifted persons who stood out from more ordinary men. But as a modern commentator observed after devoting more than nine pages to the issue, “No view escapes troubling criticism. The mysterious identity of the ‘sons of God’ continues to humble the expositor.”⁵

Also puzzling is the identity and nature of the Nephilim (v. 6:4). The word in the NRSV and other versions is not a translation but a transliteration, and its precise meaning is unknown. The Septuagint translated the word as “giants” (*gigantēs*), perhaps influenced by its only other appearance in the Hebrew Bible, in the report of the ten Israelite spies on returning from their mission and being intimidated by the size of Canaanite men (Num. 13:33). This interpretation was followed by KJV and most recently by CEB. Giants or not, they were the offspring of “sons-of-God” and the “daughters-of-humans.”

We have already considered the issues that our explanacept of *natural regularities* (and *miracle*) raises for us. All of us in modern culture think with these explanacepts, and without investing great effort we cannot think without them. The original audiences of the Flood accounts could not think with these explanacepts for the simple reason that these explanacepts did not yet exist in human consciousness. Here at the very beginning of the *YHWH* account, however, the shoe may be on the other foot. In these opening sentences we may be encountering an aspect of their *divine actions* explanacept that

⁵. Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture, vol. 1A (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 332.

our minds cannot process. If the reference to the “sons of God” refers to fallen angels (as believed by Clement of Alexandria) or to some other form of suprahuman or semi-divine reality, it makes no sense to us, because intraspecies procreation is (to our minds) biologically impossible.

But could it have made sense to the original Hebrew hearers as a result of their explanacept of *divine actions*? The evidence and arguments are mixed. While surrounding cultures may have allowed it, there is no evidence of such a conception in the Hebrew Bible (which is our only authoritative source of ancient Hebrew thinking). Remembering, however, the historians’ axiom that “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,” we must not jump too quickly to a conclusion. It is not impossible that the ancient Hebrews’ explanacept of *divine actions* could have accommodated such seemingly impossible (to us) procreation. What we do know is that the account made sense to them in some way, or they would not have preserved it for posterity. To us this obscure reference to the sexual behavior (or misbehavior) of the “sons of God” is fundamentally incoherent because we have no explanacept that accommodates it. Although we cannot make sense of this as a reason for the Flood, it may have made sense to the author and original audience of the *YHWH* account; otherwise it would not have been copied and recopied through the centuries.

We are reading the Flood narrative that was heard and understood by minds equipped with just two explanacepts: everything that happened had to be understood as a result either of *human actions* or as a result of *divine actions* (or both). There were no other explanations available. Since the almost indescribable catastrophe of the Flood was clearly not caused by any conceivable series of *human actions*, the only other option available was that the Flood was the result of *divine actions*.

<i>human actions</i>	<i>divine actions</i>
5:32 – Noah . . . fathered Shem, Ham, and Japheth	6:2 – sons-of-God saw [daughters] . . . took them . . . they [sons-of-God] . . . chose
6:3 – women . . . bore . . . children	6:3 – <i>YHWH</i> said . . . let their days be . . .
	6:4 – sons-of-God mated with . . . women

^{6:5} ***YHWH* saw** that wickedness of the humans was great in the land, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil all the time. ⁶***YHWH was sorry*** that he had made humanity in the land, and it pained his heart. ⁷So ***YHWH said***, I ***will eliminate*** from the ground the human beings I have created—the ***people*** along with ***animals*** and ***creeping things and birds*** of the sky, for I am sorry that I have made them.” ⁸But **Noah found favor** in ***YHWH’s*** sight. . . . ^{7:6}Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of water came on the land. ⁷And **Noah**, with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives, **went into the ark** ahead of the waters of the flood, . . . ¹⁶and ***YHWH* shut him in**.

<i>human actions</i>	<i>divine actions</i>
	6:5 – <i>YHWH</i> saw
	6:6 – <i>YHWH</i> was sorry

<i>human actions</i>	<i>divine actions</i>
	6:7 – <i>YHWH</i> said . . . I will eliminate . . . people . . . animals . . . creeping things . . . birds
6:8 – Noah found favor	
7:7 – Noah went into the ark	7:16 – <i>YHWH</i> shut him in

^{7:1}Then *YHWH* told Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I **have seen** that you alone in this generation are righteous before me. ²**Take** with you seven pairs of all the [ritually] clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; ³and seven pairs of the birds of the sky also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the land. ⁴For in seven days I **will send** rain on the land for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I **will erase** from the face of the ground.” ⁵And Noah did **everything** that *YHWH* had commanded him.

<i>human actions</i>	<i>divine actions</i>
	7:1 – Then <i>YHWH</i> told Noah . . . I have seen . . . take
7:5 – Noah did everything that <i>YHWH</i> had . . .	7:4 – I [<i>YHWH</i>] will send . . . and I will erase . . .

As before, all of the reported actions of Noah and of God are just that; they are either *human actions* or they are *divine actions*. There is no mention here of *miracle*, nor are *natural regularities* in view. The account states matter-of-factly that God did it, or Noah did it, or Noah did it because God told him to do it.

^{7:10} And after seven days the water of the flood came on the land. . . . ¹²The rain fell on the land forty days and forty nights. . . . ¹⁷The flood continued forty days in the land; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the land. ¹⁸The water rose and increased greatly on the land; and the ark floated on the surface of the water. ¹⁹The water rose so much on the land that all the high mountains under the whole sky were covered; ²⁰the water rose above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep. . . . ²²Everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. ²³He blotted out everything alive on the face of the ground—human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the sky; they were blotted out from the land. Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark.

<i>human actions</i>	<i>divine actions</i>
	7:4–20 – I [YHWH] will send . . . and I will erase . . . the flood came on the land . . . the rain fell on the land, . . . the flood continued . . . the waters increased and bore up the ark, . . . the waters rose above the mountains

<i>human actions</i>	<i>divine actions</i>
	7:23 – He [<i>YHWH</i>] blotted out everything alive

This section continues the description of the Flood proper. Unless we are careful to note that the entire section begins with, “I [*YHWH*] will send” and ends with, “He [*YHWH*] blotted out everything alive,” we will read it as a description of a catastrophe in the *natural order*. If pressed, we would readily concede that, as it is told, a catastrophe in the *natural order* was caused by *divine actions*. And that is how, in all likelihood, we have read the story from childhood. But that is not what the text actually says.

The supposedly *natural* catastrophe is carefully and explicitly bookended between God’s initial pronouncement of forthcoming *supranatural* doom—“I [*YHWH*] will send . . . I [*YHWH*] will erase”—and a terminal description of *supranatural* annihilation accomplished—“and He [*YHWH*] blotted out everything.” The sequence between these opening and closing statements is not a *natural* catastrophe at all; it is from start to finish the result of *divine actions*. We can only read it as a natural catastrophe if we ignore the sentences with which it begins and the sentence with which it ends.

Furthermore, the Flood could not have been perceived, much less described, as a *natural* catastrophe at that time and place. Neither the explanacept of *natural regularities* nor the explanacept of *miracle (supernatural)* was yet in existence, and they are interdependent. Until the explanacept of *natural regularities* was developed (with, as Christians would insist, God’s leading), there is no possibility of a meaningful category of *supernatural* or *miracle*. So, even though *YHWH* claims

full responsibility for sending the Flood, our category of “supernatural causation” (above and beyond what nature can do) is of no use whatever in understanding what the author(s) intended or the audience heard. Indeed, it is positively misleading in the fullest sense of that term, for it leads our minds down a pathway that did not then exist (and would not exist for hundreds of years). The Genesis Flood was understood to be the direct result of *divine actions*, for that was the only one of the two available explanacepts that could deal with an event of such overwhelming magnitude.

^{8:6} At the end of forty days **Noah opened** the window of the ark he had made . . . ⁸**and sent** out a dove to see if the water had subsided from the surface of the ground; ⁹**but the dove found no place** to set its foot, and it **returned** to him to the ark, for the water was still on the surface of all the *land*. So **he put** out his hand and **took** it and **brought** it into the ark with him. ¹⁰**He waited** another seven days, and again **sent** out the dove from the ark; ¹¹**and the dove came back** to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf. So **Noah knew** that the waters had subsided from the *land*. ¹²Then he **waited** another seven days, **and sent** out the dove; and it did not return to him anymore.

<i>human actions</i>	<i>divine actions</i>
8:6 – Noah opened . . . and sent	
8:9 – The dove found no place . . . it returned	
8:9 – He [Noah] put . . . and took . . . and brought	

<i>human actions</i>	<i>divine actions</i>
8:10 – He [Noah] waited . . . sent	
8:11 – the dove came back	
8:11 – Noah knew . . . waited . . . sent	
8:12 – . . . he waited . . . and sent	

This sequence is perfectly straightforward: Noah does some things, the dove does other things, and all that happens is adequately understood by the single explanation of *human actions*.

²⁰Noah built an altar to *YHWH*, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar.²¹And when *YHWH* smelled the pleasing aroma, he said in his heart, “I will never curse the ground again because of humanity, because the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

²²As long as the *land* endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night,
shall not cease.”

<i>human actions</i>	<i>divine actions</i>
8:20 – Noah built, . . . and took . . . and offered	8:21 – <i>YHWH</i> smelled . . . said . . . never curse nor destroy . . . and [will] ensure that seedtime, harvest, cold, heat shall not cease

With the promise that *YHWH* would never again destroy life and the world, the *human actions* and the *divine actions* in the *YHWH* account of the Flood are complete.

THE TWO EXPLANACEPTS IN THE *ELOHIM* ACCOUNT

^{6:9}These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; **Noah walked with Elohim.**
¹⁰And **Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.**

"Now the *land* had become corrupt in *Elohim's* sight, and the *land* was filled with violence. ¹²And **Elohim saw** that the *land* had become corrupt; for **all flesh had corrupted** its ways on the *land*. ¹³And **Elohim said** to Noah, "I have determined to **make an end** of all flesh, for the *land* is filled with violence because of them. I am going to destroy them along with the *land*. ¹⁴**Make yourself an ark** of *gofer* wood. With reeds **make** the ark, **and cover it** inside and out with pitch. ¹⁵This is how **you are to make** it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. ¹⁶**Make a roof** for the ark, and **finish it** to a cubit above; and **put the door** of the ark in its side; **make it** with lower, second, and third decks. ¹⁷For my part, I am going to bring a flood of water on the *land*, to destroy from under the *sky* all flesh in which is the breath of life. Everything that is on the *land* will die.

¹⁸But I will establish my covenant with you; and **you are to come** into the ark—you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. ¹⁹And of every living thing, of all flesh, **you are to bring** two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you—they are to be male and female. ²⁰Of the **birds** according to their kinds, and of the **farm animals** according to their kinds, of every **creeping thing** of the ground according to its

kind—two of every kind **shall come in** to you—to keep them alive. ²¹Also **take with** you every kind of food that is eaten, and **store it up**; and it is to be food for you and for them.” ²²**Noah did this;** he did all that *Elohim* commanded him.

<i>human actions</i>	<i>divine actions</i>
6:9 – Noah walked . . . had [three sons]	6:12 – <i>Elohim</i> saw . . . said
6:11 – all flesh had corrupted	6:13 – I [<i>Elohim</i>] . . . make . . . an end . . . destroy
6:14–19 – [You Noah] make . . . make . . . cover . . . finish . . . put . . . make . . . come . . . bring	
	6:17 – I [<i>Elohim</i>] . . . am going to bring a flood
6:20 – birds . . . farm animals . . . creeping things shall come in	6:17 . . . destroy . . . everything will die . . .
6:21 – [You Noah] . . . take . . . store	6:18 – I [<i>Elohim</i>] will establish
6:22 – Noah did this	

All of the actions described in the opening paragraphs of the *Elohim* account fall squarely within either *divine actions* or *human actions* (which included creaturely actions—the behavior of animals—when God tells Noah that two of every kind will come to him).

^{7:11}In the six-hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month—on that day all the *primeval waters* of *Tehom* burst forth, and the *floodgates* of the *sky* were opened. . . . ^{8:2}The torrential outpourings of the *primeval waters* and the *floodgates* of the *sky* were closed, the rain from the sky was held back, and the water coursed back and forth as it gradually receded from the land.

<i>human actions</i>	<i>divine actions</i>
	7:13 – the primeval waters of <i>Tehom</i> burst forth . . . the floodgates of the sky were opened
	8:2 – The primeval waters of <i>Tehom</i> and the floodgates of the sky were closed

Here, for the second time in our journey through the two Flood accounts, we encounter an explanation that does not rest at all comfortably in our minds—if we can regard it as an explanation at all—for *divine actions* includes not only the sons of God we encountered in the *YHWH* account but also the *Tehom*, the Great Abyss, the Great Deep, an entity that was already present when God began to create.⁶ The original Hebrew audience, however, had no problem with this explanation; for them the first creation account (Gen. 1:1–2:4a) was simply an account of how *Elohim* had conquered the *Tehom* and, by creating a dome or vault (*raqia'*) overhead on the second Creation day, had made possible a world of plants, animals, and human beings.

6. See Gen. 1:2.

That great creative work was now threatened by the possibility that the *Tehom*, the “Uncreator,” would break loose from its bonds. And so this second extension of *divine actions* (which now includes the *Tehom*) that we encounter in the Flood narrative, like the first, cannot be processed by our minds. Yes, we can deal with *natural regularities* (by employing *science*), and with the *supernatural (miracle)* because we have had years of practice at doing so; but without extraordinary mental effort we cannot contemplate the actions of misbehaving sons of God, nor can we picture a time when the Great Abyss opened once again. The ancient Hebrews could, and they were the audience to whom the *Genesis accounts of the Flood* were addressed.

^{7:13}On the very same day **Noah** with his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah’s wife and the three wives of his sons **entered the ark**—¹⁴they and **wild animals** of every kind, and **farm animals** of every kind, and every kind of **creeping thing** that creeps on the *land*, and every **bird** of every kind—every bird, every winged creature. ¹⁵They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life. ¹⁶And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as **Elohim** had commanded.

<i>human actions</i>	<i>divine actions</i>
7:13 – Noah . . . sons . . . wives . . . entered the ark	
7:14 – wild animals . . . farm animals . . . creeping thing . . . birds . . . entered the ark	7:16 – as <i>Elohim</i> had commanded

This section of the account begins the description of the Flood proper as it waxed and waned. As we noted in the *YHWH* account, if this description is read in isolation, it is an account of a catastrophe within the *natural order*—a very large catastrophe to be sure, but still in the realm of *nature*. But that, of course, is because we have the explanacept of *natural order* with which to understand a Great Flood. The people to whom this account was originally addressed did not have the explanacept of *natural order* and could only envision *divine actions* whenever *human actions* were ruled out by the type or the magnitude of the event. This was certainly the case with the Flood. So *Elohim*, like *YHWH*, bears full and direct responsibility for the Flood—as He said, “‘For my part, I am going to bring a flood of water on the land, to destroy from under the sky all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the land will die’” (6:17). It is instructive for us to picture each of the described events as the result of an act of *Elohim*—even though it will prove a difficult task indeed—for that is what the text says happened.

^{7:18}The water rose and increased greatly on the *land*, so that the ark floated on the surface of the water.¹⁹The water swelled so mightily on the *land* that all the high mountains under the whole *sky* were covered;²⁰the water swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep.²¹And all flesh died that moved on the *land*—birds, *farm animals*, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the *land*, and all human beings—²²everything on dry *land* in whose nostrils was the breath of life died.²⁴And the waters rose on the *land* for one hundred fifty days.

^{8:1}And *Elohim remembered Noah* and all the wild animals and all the *farm animals* that were with him in the

ark. ²The *primeval waters* of *Tehom* and the *floodgates* of the *sky were closed*, the rain from the *sky* was held back, and *Elohim* made a **wind blow** over the *land*, so that the waters subsided ³and the water coursed back and forth as it gradually receded from the *land*. At the end of one hundred fifty days the water abated; ⁴and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. ⁵The water continued to recede until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains appeared, ⁶and **he sent out a raven**; and it **flew back and forth** until the water was dried up from the *land*.

<i>human actions</i>	<i>divine actions</i>
	8:1 – <i>Elohim</i> remembered Noah
8:7 – He [Noah] sent out a raven	8:2 – <i>Elohim</i> made a wind blow
8:8 – It [raven] flew back and forth	

As we come to the termination of the *Elohim* account of the Flood, our attention turns to the sequel, where we find ourselves in more explicitly defined two-explanacept territory. It has been an interesting and possibly also a somewhat disorienting journey! We must remember, however, that we are reading something like a forwarded e-mail, and the people to whom that e-mail was addressed are not here with us to explain in detail the meaning of its contents.

^{8:13}In the six-hundred-first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the water was dried up from the *land*. **Noah removed** the covering of the ark, and **looked**, and **saw** that the surface of the ground was drying. ¹⁴In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the *land* was dry. ¹⁵Then **Elohim said to Noah**, “**Go** out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons’ wives with you. ¹⁶**Take** out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the *land*—so they may abound on the *land*, and be fruitful and multiply on the *land*.” ¹⁷So **Noah went out** with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives. ¹⁸And every **animal**, every **creeping thing**, and every **bird**, **everything** that moves on the *land*, **went out** of the ark by families.

<i>human actions</i>	<i>divine actions</i>
8:13 – Noah removed . . . looked . . . saw	8:15 – <i>Elohim</i> said to Noah go . . . take
8:18 – Noah went out	
8:19 – every animal, . . . creeping thing	
... bird . . . everything went out	

Like the *YHWH* account, the *Elohim* account concludes with a description of the divine covenant with Noah:

^{9:1}**God [Elohim]** blessed Noah and his sons, and **said** to them, “**Be fruitful and multiply**, and fill the *land*. ²The fear

and dread of you will rest on every animal of the *land*, and on every bird of the *sky*, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. ³Every moving thing that lives will be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. ⁴Only, you must not eat meat with its life, that is, its blood. ⁵For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life.

⁶Whoever sheds the blood of a human,
by a human that person's blood shall be shed;
for in his own image

God [*Elohim*] made humankind.

⁷And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the land, and multiply in it.”

⁸Then God [*Elohim*] said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals and every animal of the *land* with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the *land*.”

¹²God [*Elohim*] said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and the *land*. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the *land* and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters will never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting

covenant between God [*Elohim*] and every living creature of all flesh that is on the *land*.” ¹⁷**God** [*Elohim*] said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the *land*.”

<i>human actions</i>	<i>divine actions</i>
9:1, 7 – [You Noah] be fruitful and multiply, abound	9:1 – God [<i>Elohim</i>] blessed Noah
9:4 – You [Noah] shall not eat	9:1-5 – God [<i>Elohim</i>] said . . . I gave . . . I give . . . I require
	9:6 – God [<i>Elohim</i>] made humankind
	9:8-11 – God [<i>Elohim</i>] said . . . am establishing . . . will establish
	9:12-17 – God [<i>Elohim</i>] said . . . have set . . . bring . . . remember . . . see . . . have established

SUMMARY

Our following the two explanacepts *human actions* and *divine actions* through the two Flood accounts has shown them to be adequate to the task of explanacepts generally. They accounted for why there was “something” rather than nothing and why that “something” behaved in the way that it did. That is the task of every set of explanacepts. That is why we acquire them,

use them, and think with them. The *divine actions* explanacept accounted for *who God was, what God did, and what God wanted*. The *human actions* explanacept accounted for *who the human was and what the human did*.

We will encounter explanacepts again in the next chapter and will note once again how explanacepts interact with and complement each other. The explanacepts in any coherent package are mutually limiting, and we have seen how an event like the Flood that cannot be comprehended within the *human actions* explanacept had then to be assigned to the explanacept of *divine actions*. This mutually limiting aspect of explanacepts is a characteristic that has some very interesting consequences. We will consider a few in the next chapter.



*“The water rose so much on the land that all
the high mountains under the whole sky were
covered.”*

—Gen. 7:19 (OHV)

CHAPTER FOUR

DIVINE ACTIONS, HUMAN ACTIONS, AND NATURAL REGULARITIES

The Flood accounts capture for us, in written form, a moment in the early history of Israel when it is possible to examine the process by which our Bible came to be. This process involved a nation of farmers, sheep herders, political leaders, priests, and visionaries as they strove under God's guidance toward an ever-more adequate and functional understanding of who God was, what God did, and what God wanted for them. The concept of God grew steadily clearer and more detailed throughout Old Testament history and, in this way, prepared the Israelites for the Christ event. In that event God revealed in the historical figure of Jesus a more complete and adequate picture of God as all-encompassing, unending, universal love. It was a long and eventful journey of increasing understanding. The Flood accounts come from a time near the beginning of the journey, and for that reason are of very great value to us in the twenty-first century. Why this is the case will shortly become apparent.

The God of the Genesis Flood was a deity who wiped out

“everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life[,] . . . every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air” (Gen. 7:22, 23). In the stories that Moshe and his descendants told about God, the overall theological understanding developed over a couple of millennia into a conception of a deity who marked the fall of a single sparrow (Matt. 10:29). Such a fundamental reshaping and enhancement of the concept of God took a very long time and proceeded by many fits and starts. Through all the centuries, however, God kept teaching, and the people of Israel kept learning. The record of that extended and often tortuous course of instruction is a large part of the content of the Hebrew Bible.

If, indeed, it is the developing understanding of God that is documented in the Hebrew Bible, there is a vitally important corollary. As the Hebrews came to a more adequate understanding of who God was, what God did, and what God wanted for them (their *divine actions* explanacept), the other explanacept by which they managed their thinking (*human actions*) also changed. Furthermore, eventually both explanacepts had to adapt to the emergence of a third explanacept (*natural regularities*). This produced a major change in the “what God did” portion of the *divine actions* explanacept. The routine actions of God, such as bringing up the sun every morning and moving it steadily across the sky, marking off the daylight hours, were relocated into this new *natural regularities* explanacept. As time passed, in this and many other ways the understanding of God developed. There is very little difference between Moshe’s *human actions* explanacept and Ian Michael’s, but there is a profound difference between Moshe’s *divine actions* explanacept and Ian Michael’s. Ian Michael has grown up with the third explanacept, *natural regularities*, and it is with this explanacept

that he understands virtually everything that happens or exists in his material world.

An illustration of how the *divine actions* explanacept has changed between Moshe's time and Ian Michael's occurs in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. Perhaps surprisingly, the text reads, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord [YHWH]" (Prov. 16:33, NIV). What God did, as Moshe understood it, was to control the way a lot landed. There is nothing here to suggest that God controlled the fall of a lot only when the outcome was important in the life of the person who tossed the lot. The text simply said that one of the things for which God was responsible was "every decision" that depended on how a lot landed.

Here we come face-to-face with a statement whose words we can understand but whose meaning most of us now find incomprehensible. How could Moshe have thought this way? Didn't he know that the outcome of the toss of a lot is determined by identifiable (though not practically measurable) physical forces? No, he didn't. The package of explanacepts with which his mind worked explained everything that happened, and at that time in history it contained only two possibilities. Everything that happened was the result either of *human actions* or of *divine actions*. In the case of the lot thrown into a Hebrew lap, where the outcome could not be explained as a result of *human actions* (for the obvious reason that no human person controlled the final position of the lot), it could be accounted for only by *divine actions*, namely, an action of YHWH.

Trying to wrap our minds around this sentence in Proverbs and believe that God directly controls the outcome of every so-called game of chance—every time a card is dealt, a roulette wheel spins, or the arm of a slot machine pulled—is likely to be (for most people) a mentally wrenching experience. And if we

carefully read the Flood accounts and note what they actually say about the causes of events, we may well find it to be mentally wrenching as well. That is precisely why the Flood accounts are so valuable to us. They provide us with a record of the developing understanding of “what God does” in that nation of farmers, sheep herders, political leaders, priests, and visionaries to whom we are so deeply indebted for our understanding of God. It is a record of an understanding at a very early period in its development, when the only conceptual alternative to *human actions* was *divine actions*. If the cause of an event was not plausibly *human action*, it was necessarily understood to be *divine action*, usually God’s.

EXPLANACEPTS IN CIRCUMSCRIBED PACKAGES

In addition to being circumscribed, a package or set of explanacepts is also omnicompetent; that is, everything that happens is explained by one or more of the explanacepts in the package. Any event that cannot be satisfactorily explained by one explanacept has to be explained by another explanacept within the package; “loose ends” are not acceptable. So when the package consisted of only two explanacepts (*human actions* and *divine actions*), an event that could not be plausibly explained by one was necessarily explained by the other.

That is still true, even though our set of explanacepts has grown from two to three. Everything that happens of which we become aware is necessarily explained by one of the three explanacepts in our current package. Of course, it may well be that we do not know and cannot explain the precise sequence of actions leading up to a particular event. This is often the case. But we always know the category into

which the event fits. Take earthquakes, for example. Today we confidently explain them in terms of *natural regularities*: we attribute them to the movement of the earth's tectonic plates rubbing against each other. These plates float on the very viscous but still liquid magma in the asthenosphere between the earth's core and the plates at the earth's surface. Furthermore, we are reasonably sure that the magma remains a viscous liquid because of the heat released by radioactivity. That we now explain earthquakes by *natural regularities* is a relatively recent development, and it is possible to pinpoint when it occurred. Prior to that moment in time, throughout all previously recorded history, earthquakes were regarded as a manifestation of God's anger and thus without question a result of *divine actions*.

In 1727 and again in 1755, moderate earthquakes rocked Boston and nearby regions of New England, resulting in many sermons in local churches. Most of the preachers attributed the tremors to God's wrath and left the matter there. One notable sermon by Thomas Prince (1687–1758), however, clearly distinguished between the “first cause” of the earthquakes—God's judgment—and their natural or “second cause.” That is, the earthquakes also had a physical origin, consistent with *natural regularities*. The natural “second cause” Prince favored was that of vapors expanding in caverns deep underground and thus rocking and shaking the earth's surface.¹ Here, as in the Flood accounts, there is a moment in explanatory development that has been captured in a written document. In this case, earthquakes, an example of things that happen, were (in 1755) in the process of moving from the

¹. R. M. Hazen, ed., *North American Geology: Early Writings*. Benchmark Papers in Geology 51 (Stroudsburg, PA: Dowden, Hutchinson and Ross, 1979), 10.

traditional explanacept of *divine actions* (God's punishment) to the relatively new explanacept of *natural regularities*.

Before we get even deeper into the interaction between explanacepts, we should, perhaps, examine the difference between an *explanacept* and an *explanation*. The words are obviously closely related, and so are their meanings. Explanacepts are larger, more general conceptual categories that give power to explanations so that they can, indeed, "explain." Take Thomas Prince's suggestion that vapors expanding in underground caves caused earthquakes. That explanation was effective because it fit into a thought category in the minds of Prince's congregants. That place where the explanation fitted was the explanacept of *natural regularities*.²

EXPLANACEPTS IN MUTUAL INTERACTION

Significant changes in any explanacept interact with—that is, influence and depend on—the other explanacepts in the package. We have just considered in detail how this interaction is illustrated by an explanation of earthquakes. Separating earthquakes from the *divine* explanacept could not occur until the concept of *natural regularities* had matured enough to take

2. Prince was able to "explain" earthquakes because both he and his congregants employed the explanacept *natural regularities*, and their explanacept *divine actions* was in the process of adjusting accordingly. The twofold understanding of earthquakes, involving two different explanacepts, was expressed by giving earthquakes two causes: a "first cause" of God's establishment of both natural and moral order (a *divine action*) and a "second cause" of expanding vapors (a *natural regularity*). Of course, people who do not believe in the reality of God, or who have a different concept of who God is and what God does, understand earthquakes simply in terms of *natural regularities*.

over “earthquake responsibility.” For this reason, attributing a different understanding of God simply to a “different time” and/or a “different culture” fails to express the full extent of the profound changes that occurred between Moshe’s time and Ian Michael’s. Thomas Prince’s educated New Englanders could accept the idea that earthquakes might not be simply an expression of the wrath of God precisely because other societal forces of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries enabled them to conceptualize “first” (theological) and “second” (natural) causes. A few generations earlier, that conceptualization was not possible. For Moshe, who lived thousands of years earlier, it was out of the question.

The explanacept of *divine actions*, as it was developed through the centuries by Hebrew prophets, and subsequently by Christian evangelists, apostles, and theologians, could offload to *natural regularities* some of its explanatory functions. Such changes take time, however, and a generous God has allowed the ancient Hebrew and historic Christian minds plenty of it. But God has sometimes accelerated the process by communicating more directly with particular figures and having them pass on to their communities the insights they thus acquired. This, too, is part of the Biblical record.

Another question involving the Flood accounts that hangs in the air can now be answered: Why are the Flood accounts a part of the Bible at all—if, in truth, they document a very early and comparatively inadequate (to our way of thinking) stage of understanding and explanation? We are clearly not the first to ask this important question; it has exercised the minds and challenged the hearts of believers ever since the Old Testament canon was put together early in the Common Era. It was certainly a burning question when a purpose similar to that of our Old Testament was served by collections of scrolls such as those in in

the library of Qumran (from whence came the important Dead Sea Scrolls). The usual answer is that each of the Biblical authors was a child of the time and culture. Furthermore, the Spirit of God acted not upon the words of the Biblical text but upon the minds of the writers of those words.³

This explanation is certainly valid, but we propose that the Flood accounts show why more can and should be said. That “more” is that the human understanding of God—and thus the particularities of *divine actions*—will develop in interaction with growth in and maturation of the other explanacepts in the mind of each human being. We believe that the set of explanacepts available to human minds, at all times and in all places throughout human history, has effectively accounted for everything that happens. Although these explanations have changed over time, there has never been a period of time or a human group in which a significant part of reality was left without some explanation. We in the twenty-first century are certain that everything that happens is explainable by *natural regularities*, by *human actions*, and/or (for those of us who are theists) by *divine actions*. In the pre-Christian centuries from which the Flood accounts come to us, the Hebrews were equally certain that everything that happened was caused either by *human* (or other creaturely) *actions* or by *divine actions*. A similar conception of reality extended to the first century CE, for the disciples of Jesus cast lots to discover God’s will in choosing a replacement for Judas as one of the Twelve (Acts 1:24–26). Even

3. See, for example, Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages from the Writings of Ellen G. White*, bk. 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 21: “The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. . . . God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers.”

at that comparatively late date, to take a decision out of human control was simultaneously and unavoidably to put it into God's hands; they obviously believed that *YHWH* controlled the way the lots fell. We today think differently because we have an additional explanacept that allows us to do so.

Thus we return full circle to the Genesis Flood accounts and their picture of God. It was clear to those who heard accounts of that epochal disaster that the events that then transpired could not be conceivably understood as resulting from *human actions*, so the causative agent had to be *God*, just as it is reported in the opening paragraph of both the *YHWH* and *Elohim* accounts.

But there was a problem: Moshe's developing understanding of ethical monotheism—particularly the *ethical* part—did not rest comfortably with making God responsible for the chaos and wholesale killing of innocent as well as culpable life by the Flood. There had to be more to the matter than that. Bringing a Flood to destroy practically all of humankind (including small children and babies) was not the sort of thing that *YHWH* or *Elohim* did. But a catastrophic Flood had in fact happened, of that Moshe was sure, and it had to be explained somehow. Conceptually, there was no other possibility at that time in human history than to ascribe it to *divine actions*—“what God did.” But that did not fit with “who God was.” And so the *human actions* explanacept had also to be invoked, not as the physical cause of the Flood (only *divine actions* could explain that) but as the moral cause.

With the Flood accounts preserved for us in Genesis, we can witness a circumscribed explanacept package in action. For Moshe, the Flood was satisfactorily accounted for, while simultaneously the developing understanding of God was provided for. In an analogous development some three thousand years later, a relatively new understanding of *natural regularities*

was invoked to explain that earthquakes were at least partially caused by the earth's own physical dynamics.

Every step forward in the developing understanding of God has involved advancing knowledge of the particularities of *human actions* and *divine actions*, as well as increasing awareness of *natural regularities*. The early stages of this process, as reported by Hebrew writers in thirty-nine books over several centuries, resulted in the library we know as the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. It laid the groundwork for, and led up to, the Christ event, which in turn transformed for all time the human understanding of who God is, what God does, and what God wants for us.

CHAPTER FIVE

“LAND,” “WORLD,” OR “EARTH”? WHY THE TRANSLATION OF ‘ERETS LOOMS SO LARGE

THREE WORDS FROM ONE

The pictures that the three words *land*, *world*, and *earth* create in Ian Michael’s contemporary mind when he reads the Bible are important. These pictures are the media through which the Biblical story becomes understandable. To Ian Michael, each of these three words conjures up a reality that differs markedly from the other two.

With *world* he may picture a globe with a recognizable continent or two on its surface, or perhaps his whole cultural environment. If the former, for reasons that are not entirely clear, the globe-with-continents will often have a few lines of latitude and longitude indicated sketchily on its surface. *Earth*, on the other hand, almost always evokes a planetary sphere—planet Earth—and is often shown in some obvious relationship to other planets or to the sun. *World* seldom, and *land* virtually never, is attached pictorially or conceptually to the solar system

or to the sun. Since the moon missions of the twentieth century, for many of us earth is a blue sphere, swathed in clouds, rising over the rocky and barren surface of the moon. To us, *earth* connotes a rocky planet—the third one out from the sun, held in orbit by the sun’s gravity.

Land is entirely different and does not look as though it belongs at all in this group of three English words. It is clearly less imposing (and less important?) than *world* and *earth*, since it always denotes a much more limited reality. Depending on Ian Michael’s background and maybe on his profession, he may think of “land” as real estate or acreage, as in the common advice, “Buy land. It’s a great investment, and they’re not making any more of it!”

There is, however, another aspect of *land* that he readily recognizes in the appropriate setting, but it may not come to mind when he encounters the word in isolation or indeed when he reads it in the Bible. It is “land” as concrete evidence of an emotion, a deep-seated, almost lyrical attachment to one’s roots, an attachment that is difficult to capture adequately in words. It is this “land” that is the subject of poetry and song—and, in election years, references to it (“the land of the free”) are the stock in trade of the politician’s stump speech. This is the land of which Sir Walter Scott writes in “The Lay of the Last Minstrel” (canto 6):

*Breathes there the man with soul so dead
Who never to himself hath said,
This is my own, my native land.*

For Francis Scott Key it is:

The land of the free and the home of the brave.

For Samuel Francis Smith (and generations of American schoolchildren):

*Land where my fathers died,
Land of the pilgrims' pride.*

It is also the land of the Woody Guthrie song from 1940.

*This land is my land; this land is your land . . .
From the Redwood Forest to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and me.*

THE "LAND" OF THE BIBLE, THE "LAND" THAT IS '*ERETS*'

It may come as a surprise to readers who are not conversant with ancient languages that all three words in the title of this chapter are accepted English translations of the same Hebrew word, '*erets*'. How is it possible that English words that seem so different and conjure up such different mental pictures should all be able to convey the meaning of the same Hebrew word? Pushing the matter further, obviously a translator at some time and in some place has made the decision for Ian Michael and the rest of us about the proper English word for '*erets*' in any particular place in the Biblical text. It seems likely—very likely, in fact—that what Ian Michael gets is whatever the translator pictured upon encountering '*erets*' in the text.

So is "earth" correct, or should it be "land"? It does make a difference—a very big difference, as we shall see. Most translators are conservative in their choices of English words and, more often than not, translate '*erets*' with the same word that William

Tyndale used in 1530 or (if there is a difference) the one selected by the translators of the KJV in 1611. To the extent this is true for the NRSV, we are still getting Tyndale's mental picture for '*erets*' (or that of the KJV translators), even though several hundred years have passed and many generations of translators and many translations have come and gone.

When they heard the word '*erets*', did the Hebrews envision something that Ian Michael would, in the twenty-first century, instinctively identify as "earth"—or, alternatively, did they envision something that he would instinctively recognize as "land"? The answer to this question is very important, because Genesis was *addressed to the Hebrews*, and it is in their mental pictures—their understanding of the text—that the authoritative meaning of the text resides.

THE MEANING OF "EARTH" HAS CHANGED OVER TIME

Here is another important question: If some English words for '*erets*' are more accurate than others in the sense that they more nearly capture the meaning that this Hebrew word evoked in the minds of the original hearers, is it possible that some are so wide of the mark that they are now simply wrong? Is it possible that an English equivalent for '*erets*' that was accurate enough (again defining accuracy in terms of what the original hearers understood the word to mean) to be serviceable at some time in the past, may no longer be serviceable because its meaning has changed too much? This is almost certainly the case.

For Ian Michael, "earth" is essentially synonymous with planet Earth—for the simple reason that not only have

Copernicus and Galileo weighed in on the matter, but in the interim humankind has slipped the bonds of planet Earth, allowing Ian Michael to see his home planet as it appears when viewed from outer space. For him now, "earth" in a cosmological context simply means planet Earth. But for the ancient Hebrews it could never have meant that, for the obvious reason that they thought the *'erets* was fixed (and most certainly did not travel around the sun while held in its orbit by gravity). On the contrary, their *'erets* could never be moved, for God had established it. Its very immobility was proof of God's power. Thus *'erets* can no longer be translated "earth" without misleading Ian Michael as he reads the Hebrew Bible in the twenty-first century.

"World" is not much better. A telling phrase that is often applied to the Middle East of Bible times is "the then-known world." In and of itself this phrase is all that is needed to show that the meaning of "world" has changed as time has passed.

With "earth" and "world" out of the running, we are left with "land." We know that it is serviceable because throughout the Old Testament, the land of Israel was often designated as "the Land of Promise" or as "the Promised Land." But even these expressions fail to capture the intensity of affection with which Jews, from antiquity down to the present, regard "the land of Israel."

So if "land" is the most common English rendering of *'erets* and quite possibly the most accurate, what is the justification for using any other English word? A tally of how often a translator chose "land" and how often the choice was "earth" provides some important insights. In what follows, we will use word frequencies in the NRSV and only briefly refer to the KJV and the NIV, but the result would be essentially the same if we used any of the other standard translations.

WHY IS 'ERETS IN GENESIS 1:1–II:28 SO DIFFERENT FROM 'ERETS IN THE REST OF GENESIS?

From Creation to the call of Abram (Gen. 1:1–II:27), the NRSV translates '*erets*' as "earth" in eighty-four out of ninety-six occurrences.¹ A reader might well conclude that nine times out of ten, a picture of "earth" came to mind when a translator read the Hebrew word '*erets*', and only rarely did the translator picture "land." That is not what happened, however, for if we examine the matter more closely it is clear that the NRSV translators must have *always* pictured "earth" on reading '*erets*' whenever such a picture was possible. It was only when it was impossible to picture "earth" that they settled on something else for '*erets*'.

In the early chapters of Genesis, '*erets*' is translated as "land" twelve times.² It always occurs in connection with a country (Cush, Shinar, etc.) or a country of origin (Nimrod's land of birth), and to put the word *earth* in the context of "the earth of Shinar" would be nonsensical. Thus, all instances of '*erets*' being translated as "land" are instances where the translator had no choice in the matter; '*erets*' had to be translated as "land" because to do otherwise made no sense. Where, however, it was possible to mentally picture '*erets*' as "earth," that is how it was envisioned. What makes this matter curious is that in the rest of Genesis, translators very rarely envisioned "earth" when they read the Hebrew

1. Gen. 1:1, 2, 10, 11a, 11b, 12, 15, 17, 20, 22, 24a, 24b, 25, 26a, 26b, 28a, 28b, 29, 30a, 30b; 2:1, 4a, 4b, 5a, 5b, 6; 4:12, 14; 6:4, 5, 6, 11a, 11b, 12a, 12b, 13a, 13b, 17a, 17b; 7:3, 4, 6, 10, 12, 14, 17a, 17b, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24; 8:1, 3, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14, 17a, 17b, 17c, 19, 22; 9:1, 2, 7, 10a, 10b, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, 19; 10:8, 25, 32; 11:1, 4, 8, 9a, 9b.

2. Gen. 2:11, 12, 13; 4:16; 10:5, 10, 11, 31; 11:2, 28.

word *'erets*—more than 90 percent of the time they translated it as “land.” We will return to this linguistic curiosity again in chapter 11, for *'erets* as “earth” in Genesis 1:1–11:27 versus *'erets* as “land” elsewhere has significant implications for how Ian Michael understands not only the Flood story but the entire Old Testament.

In both the KJV and the NIV, a similar about-face occurs in the translation of *'erets* (“earth” prior to the call of Abram; “land” thereafter). In the NIV, however, *'erets* is not translated at all when it occurs with the name of a territory or a country of origin. Apparently the translators concluded that since modern readers do not usually refer to Canada as the “land of Canada,” there is no reason to translate the “land of Shinar” as anything other than “Shinar.” In all, some fifty instances of *'erets* are left untranslated in the NIV rendering of Genesis. There are a few cases where it seems they felt that *'erets* was simply redundant and added nothing to the text. We think that every instance of *'erets* should have been translated in order to communicate the “feel” of the original Hebrew.

AN ENGLISH READER'S UNDERSTANDING IS PROFOUNDLY INFLUENCED BY THE TRANSLATORS' MENTAL PICTURES

As Tyndale labored over the preparation of the first translation of the Hebrew text directly into English, he did not have a problem with *'erets*, for in his day “earth” could not have been mistaken for planet Earth. Neither Tyndale nor anyone else in 1530 knew that “earth” was a planet. Copernicus and Galileo were still in the future. So

Tyndale can hardly be blamed for what he set in motion by his unfortunate choice of “earth” as the English equivalent of the Hebrew *'erets*.

More often than not, Bible translators are conservative in their word choices. Since Tyndale had chosen “earth” for *'erets* in Genesis 1:1–11:27, the translators of the KJV followed suit—despite the fact that in the intervening sixty years, “earth” had come to mean planet Earth for many (such as Galileo). Within a hundred years of Tyndale’s death, “earth” had come to mean our planet, and it has been understood that way ever since. All translators after those who translated the KJV worked in a conceptual environment where “earth” in a cosmological context, including the description of the Great Flood, was almost inevitably understood to mean planet Earth.

All subsequent translators followed Tyndale’s choice. In the process they have rendered the first chapters of Genesis as a description of the coming-to-be of planet Earth rather than the creation and subsequent devastation of all the land known to Moshe personally or by reputation. But if the translation choices ever since Tyndale are brought into daylight and examined critically, it is immediately evident that something is seriously wrong. Whatever was described in the early chapters of Genesis, it could not have been the planet Earth occupying its assigned place in the solar system. So if the creation of a solar system including planet Earth was not a possible mental construct for the original hearers of Genesis, why is *'erets* translated “earth” rather than “land”? This is a particularly salient question when “land” is the most common rendering in the rest of Genesis and indeed in the rest of the Old Testament. The most likely explanation is that those mistaken (but essential!)

translators, virtually all of whom, post-Tyndale, knew that the earth was indeed a planet, believed the Hebrew text to be talking about the creation or flooding of their planet. So they translated *'erets* as “earth.”

Would Moshe have pictured a planet when he listened to the narrative of the Flood? Of course not. If Tyndale in the mid-sixteenth century did not know of planet Earth, neither could Moshe, who lived more than two thousand years earlier. And since Moshe thought in Hebrew, there was no intervening translator to complicate matters. No, *'erets* for Moshe was the land—all of it. Did he understand that the Flood covered that “land”? Of course.

In the process of translating from Hebrew, we have taken out limited membership in the club of vexatious translators. We have not, however, joined with them in this particular matter. We think that for us to translate *'erets* as “earth” would be to knowingly mislead the reader.

Unfortunately, while translating *'erets* as “land” avoids the otherwise inevitable confusion with planet Earth, it does not do quite what Moshe would have expected of it. Unless “land” is prefixed by “home” or “native” or suffixed by “of birth” or some similar word, for Ian Michael it no longer evokes the appropriate mental picture. It generally fails to produce in him the longing that it almost certainly produced in Moshe. However, even in the modern world it sometimes still does; it is not by accident that the territory of Israel is known by its inhabitants as *'erets Israel*, the Land of Israel.

So why make such a fuss out of this seemingly minor point? Why shouldn’t Ian Michael picture planet Earth at the same juncture in the Biblical text where Moshe pictured “land,” “homeland,” or “Promised Land”? An example may clarify why this is no minor matter.

<i>'erets</i> as “land”	<i>'erets</i> as “earth”
For in yet seven days I will make it rain upon the land (<i>'erets</i>) for forty days and forty nights and I will blot out all existing things that I have made from the face of the soil (<i>adamah</i>)	For in yet seven days I will make it rain upon the earth (<i>'erets</i>) for forty days and forty nights and I will blot out all existing things that I have made from the face of the soil (<i>adamah</i>)
He blotted out all existing things that were on the face of the soil (<i>adamah</i>). . . . They were blotted out from the land (<i>'erets</i>)	He blotted out all existing things that were on the face of the soil (<i>adamah</i>). . . . They were blotted out from the earth (<i>'erets</i>)

At both the start and the conclusion of the Flood narrative it is clear that “land,” since it is paired with “face of the soil,” is the more likely translation of *'erets*. Here *YHWH* is describing the most horrifyingly negative effect that the Flood will have (and that the Flood did have). If there was ever a place in the *YHWH* narrative where “earth” as a translation of *'erets* would have been at home, it should have been here; but it isn’t. Paired as *'erets* is with “face of the soil” that has an equivalent extent, we contend that here *'erets* is much more properly translated “land” rather than “earth.” This is quite apart from the fact that *'erets* translated as “earth” is apt to mislead Ian Michael into picturing planet Earth rather than Moshe’s “land.” That is a matter that will be more directly addressed in the concluding chapter of this book.

This raises the interesting question, “Are there any places in the Flood accounts where only *earth* can fill the bill?” If the question being asked is, “Are there any places where

'planet Earth' is the most appropriate translation of '*erets*?'" the answer is unequivocally no.

Some would argue that when the Hebrew author talks of God instructing Noah to "keep seed alive" upon the "face of all the '*erets*,'" that a word more far-reaching than "land" is demanded. However, as we have already seen in the immediately adjoining sentence, the very same Hebrew phrase is used with a Hebrew word that is far more limited in extent than even "land"—it is tied unequivocally to "soil." That word is *adamah*, which means *soil*, *dust*, *dirt*. God created Adam out of *adamah*, an alliterative cleverness that is lost in the English translation but which Moshe would have enjoyed. However, if there is to be a place where '*erets* is appropriately expanded, it is where it means not planet Earth but something akin to "all the nations of earth." Here Psalm 24:1 (KJV) will likely come to mind: "The earth ['*erets*] is the Lord's [*YHWH*'s] and the fullness thereof, the world [*tebel*] and they that dwell therein."

To effectively render into English the parallelism that is typical of Hebrew poetry the translator must come up with two English words that mean almost (but not quite) the same thing. So do "earth" and "world" suffice? Well, no, not even close. To translate *YHWH*'s '*erets* as "earth" will almost inevitably (and understandably) conjure up planet Earth in Ian Michael's mind. To complete the parallelism, "world" to Ian Michael will very likely be envisioned as a globe teeming with people, "those who dwell therein." Since neither concept was available to Moshe, what would he likely have heard? *Tebel* to Moshe meant "inhabited lands" or, perhaps, "all the land that could be inhabited"—hence, all land excluding only the uninhabitable wasteland. So Moshe, in Psalm 24:1, would have heard something like "The

land is *YHWH*'s and the fullness thereof; the inhabited lands and they that dwell therein." Ian Michael, who has grown up with the soaring lyricism of the KJV can only hope that Moshe's Psalm 24:1 sounded better in Hebrew.

We have followed the chain of events set in motion by Tyndale's selection of "earth" as an English equivalent for the Hebrew *'erets*. We have noted that the translators of the KJV followed suit and so has every other translator in the intervening years. Has any mischief resulted from this sequence of events? Absolutely. It has resulted in the Bible being accused of promulgating pseudo-science and lent credence to the trope that there is ongoing "warfare between theology and science."³ It has also led to the widespread impression that there is a legitimate scientific enterprise called "Flood geology." However, to now digress and consider these very important matters in the detail that they deserve would take us far afield from the actual wording of the Flood narrative. It would involve us in consideration of geology, hydrology, geochronology, and so on; and these areas of specialty knowledge are quite distant from our present concerns. Still, both Flood geology and the science/religion interaction are inextricably intertwined with the Flood narrative. Because of this and because of their importance, we will return to them in the Afterword to this volume.

³. Andrew D. White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (New York: D. Appleton, 1897), 146.

CHAPTER SIX

WHAT A CUNEIFORM ACCOUNT CAN TELL US ABOUT THE GENESIS NARRATIVE

SCRIPTURE HAS “SOURCES”

It comes as a surprise to many modern readers of the Bible that some portions of Scripture have antecedents—documents that predate the Hebrew text we have today and from which information was incorporated into books of the Bible as the scrolls were being written. To the extent that it has crossed their minds, Bible readers probably envision an inspired writer sitting down and, without consulting any “references,” producing a page or two, maybe an entire scroll. The newly written document, it is imagined, was then added to the collection of scrolls that, in time, became Scripture. This scenario may have been the case for some of Holy Writ, but much of the Bible was produced by writers who drew upon earlier materials that they consulted, supplemented, revised, and/or refuted. Many of the actual writers of the Bible were writing material from earlier oral traditions, to ensure that those materials would be

available to future generations. Probably they undertook this task because they realized that knowledge in written form was more likely, though not guaranteed, to survive.

We know that written materials preceded much of Scripture because the Bible writers tell us so. The Old Testament contains various references to prior literary materials, some of which are vaguely familiar to modern readers, but most of which are not. However, all of these references to prior written materials are useful in helping us to understand the processes by which our Bible came to be and the factors and forces that made it what it is.

One reason many modern readers do not suspect that there were prior documents is the usual practice of Bible writers not to provide references for their sources, which gives the impression that they were eyewitnesses to, or at least contemporary with, the events they described. Despite this general practice, however, Bible writers occasionally included clear indications that they did not have firsthand knowledge of the events they were recounting. Indeed, sometimes they did not even live in the same century. For example, reporting that Abram, on instructions from *YHWH* and at the age of seventy-five, moved from Haran to Shechem in Canaan, the Biblical text notes that “at that time the Canaanite was still in the land” (Gen. 12:6). This clearly indicates that the Canaanites no longer inhabited Canaan when the writer was recording the story. Evidently some period of time had elapsed, long enough to warrant an explanation. In this particular case the elapsed time had to have exceeded several hundred years, for the Canaanites were not driven from the land until the era of Joshua or Judges at the earliest. That was later than the time of Abraham by half a millennium or more.

In describing the conquest of Jericho, the narrator noted

the crucial contribution of the prostitute Rahab and, almost as an aside, added that “her family has lived in Israel ever since” (Josh. 6:25). This parenthetical comment implies that the writer was narrating events in an already distant past. After describing the unique phenomenon of the sun “standing still” for “about a whole day” during a battle between Israelites and Amorites (Josh. 10:13), the writer observed, “There has been no day like it before or since” (v. 14)—again suggesting the passage of a substantial period of time.

In describing the events of that extraordinary day, the writer of the book of Joshua cites the Book of Jashar (Josh. 10:13). That this document was known to and consulted by Bible writers is evident also from a reference to the same work in 2 Samuel 1:18, where it is mentioned as a source that could be readily accessed to document David’s anguish over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan in battle. “David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan. (He ordered that The Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah; it is written in the Book of Jashar)” (vv. 17, 18). In addition to occasional references elsewhere—to the Book of the Wars of *YHWH* (Num. 21:14) and to the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia (Esther 10:2), scores of literary sources were cited in the historical books of 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles. According to a recent list¹ these include:

Acts of Gad the Seer (1 Chron. 29:29)

Acts of Nathan the Prophet (1 Chron. 29:29)

Acts of Samuel the Seer (1 Chron. 29:29; perhaps references to 1 and 2 Samuel)

1. See Duane Christensen, “The Lost Books of the Bible,” *Bible Review* 14, no. 5 (October 1998); “Are There Lost Books of the Bible?” Apologetics Press, 2003, www.apologeticspress.org/article/66, accessed Feb. 7, 2014.

Acts of Shemaiah the Prophet (2 Chron. 12:15)

Acts of Solomon (1 Kings 11:41)

Acts of the Kings of Israel (2 Chron. 33:18)

Acts of the Seers (2 Chron. 33:19)

Acts of Uzziah by the Prophet Isaiah (2 Chron. 26:22)

Annals of Jehu son of Hanani (2 Chron. 20:34)

Book of Gad the Seer (1 Chron. 29:29)

Book of the Kings of Israel (1 Chron. 9:1; 2 Chron. 20:34)

Book of the Kings of Israel and Judah (2 Chron. 27:7; 35:27; 36:8)

Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel (2 Chron. 16:11; 25:26; 32:32)

Chronicles of Gad the Seer (1 Chron. 29:29)

Chronicles of King David (1 Chron. 27:24)

Chronicles of the Kings of Israel (1 Kings 14:19; 15:31; 16:5, 14, 20; 20:27; 22:39; 2 Kings. 1:18; 10:34; 13:8, 12; 14:15, 28; 15:11, 15, 21, 26, 31)

Chronicles of the Kings of Judah (1 Kings 14:29; 15:7, 23; 22:45; 2 Kings. 8:23; 12:19; 13:12; 14:15, 18, 28; 15:6, 36; 16:19; 20:20; 21:17, 25; 23:28; 24:5)

Commentary on the Book of the Kings (2 Chron. 24:27)

Commentary on the Prophet Iddo (1 Chron. 13:22)

History of Nathan the Prophet (1 Chron. 29:29; 2 Chron. 9:29)

Lament for Josiah (2 Chron. 35:25; possibly referring to Lam. 3)

Prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite (2 Chron. 9:29)

Visions of Iddo the Seer (2 Chron. 9:29; 12:15; 13:22)

Vision of the Prophet Isaiah (2 Chron. 32:32; possibly referring to the canonical book of Isaiah).

THE ARK TABLET

Outside the Hebrew community, antecedent references to a great flood occur in Babylonian and Assyrian literature. The most recent addition to these documents is the Ark Tablet, an Akkadian account written in cuneiform (literally, “wedge-shaped”) script, one of the earliest known forms of writing. It has recently been translated into English by Irving Finkel in *The Ark Before Noah: Decoding the Story of the Flood*.² Along with his translation, Finkel provides a description of the fascinating sequence of events that brought the tablet into his hands.

In the Ark Tablet, the Babylonian figure corresponding to the biblical Noah is Atra-hasis, and the cuneiform text is of great interest because of its similarities to and differences from the Biblical narrative. Judged by the characteristics of the script, the Babylonian story apparently dates from about the time of Abraham in the Middle Bronze Age (2200–1570 BCE). If these clues are being correctly interpreted, it is the earliest Flood story yet discovered and translated. Here we reproduce and explore portions of Finkel’s translation.

*Wall, wall! Reed wall, reed wall!
 Atra-hasis, pay heed to my advice,
 That you may live for ever!
 Destroy your house, build a boat;
 Spare property and save life!
 Draw out the boat that you will make
 On a circular plan.³*

2. Irving Finkel, *The Ark Before Noah: Decoding the Story of the Flood* (New York: Doubleday, 2014).

3. Ibid., 107.

The text of the Ark Tablet begins in the middle of a conflict among the gods. This conflict was elaborated on in later Babylonian accounts but was simply assumed in this one. The high god, Enlil, had decided to wipe out humanity, but a lesser god, Enki, had taken pity on the human race and gone to warn Atra-hasis.⁴ Although Enki was willing to take on the risk of opposing Enlil, he wanted to preserve “plausible deniability” in case he was caught. So he did not speak directly to Atra-hasis but to the outside wall of his reed house, knowing that Atra-hasis, who was inside, would hear every word (walls made of reeds were not very soundproof).

The opening line of the tablet was apparently the prescribed way for a proper Flood narrative to begin; almost all Babylonian cuneiform Flood accounts begin with a verbatim repetition of the words, “Wall, wall! Reed wall!”⁵

Already the differences between the gods of the Ark Tablet and the God of the Biblical account are obvious and profound. The God who warned Noah was deeply troubled by the need for a Flood, later deciding that one was (more than?) enough; but this God did not attempt to deceive and avoid detection with the accompanying punishment, nor did he dangle immortality to entice the human into building the ark.⁶

But there is more. In the fourth line, Enki told Atra-hasis to destroy his house and build a boat. Now from Genesis we are familiar with the idea of building a boat to escape the oncoming Deluge, but we have heard nothing about destroying one’s house in the process. This odd juxtaposition of destroying a house to build a boat is important, as we shall see; it may illuminate a

⁴ Ibid., 256.

⁵. Ibid., 8. When Finkel first saw the Ark Tablet, he was able to translate the first line at a glance. He immediately recognized that it was an ark tablet because the cuneiform letters spelled out the words, “Wall, wall, reed wall.”

⁶. Ibid., 107: “that you may live for ever.”

puzzling aspect of the instructions that *Elohim* gave to Noah.

The seventh line describes the projected ark as circular—more like a gigantic basket than a typical oblong boat. This was not an error of composition or transmission, as the lines that immediately follow make clear:

*Let her length and breadth be equal,
Let her floor area be one field, let her sides be one nindan
high
You saw kannu ropes and aslu ropes/rushes (?) for [a coracle
before!]
Let someone (else) twist the fronds and palm-fibre for you!
It will surely consume 14,430 (sutu)!⁷*

There is no doubt that this ark was circular in shape, because the tablet says “on a circular plan” and follows up with “let her length and breadth be equal.” To anyone familiar with the Biblical narrative and its longer-than-wide ark, this comes as a surprise. And more surprises await. Not only was this ark circular in shape; it was also gigantic. English equivalents for the cuneiform dimensions indicate a floor area of approximately an acre. And the sides were eighteen feet high—not even a giraffe could see over the edge.⁸ This was a vessel huge enough to accommodate a large number of stanchions for its animal passengers—3,600 stanchions are, in fact, specified later in the text.

Enki was somewhat dismissive of the labor required. He told Atra-hasis to have someone else twist the palm-fiber fronds and reeds into a rope, and then casually mentioned the rope’s extraordinary (literally, “incredible”) length, which

7. Ibid., 107, 108.

8. Ibid., 161, 170.

translates to about 527 kilometers or 327 miles.⁹ What was Atra-hasis supposed to do with a plan for an inconceivably enormous circular basket-vessel and 327 miles of twisted palm-fiber or reed rope? He described his response:

*I set in place thirty ribs
Which were one parsiktu-vessel thick, ten nindan long;
I set up 3,600 stanchions within her
Which were half (a parsiktu-vessel) thick, half a nindan
high:
I constructed her cabins above and below.¹⁰*

The stanchions for the animals and the cabins for the humans were clear enough, but what were the thirty “ribs” that were approximately ten feet wide and 180 feet long? Perhaps, as we shall see, they were intended to radiate out from a central hub, stiffening the walls of the ark and holding them upright.¹¹

THE GENESIS NARRATIVE

Like Atra-hasis, Noah was told to build a vessel, and the vessel was to include “nests” or “cells” or “rooms” (Heb. *qinnim*, Gen. 6:14). But this Hebrew word is confusingly similar to another word, *qinim*, which means “reeds.” Originally the two words were identical, written without the Hebrew “points” (similar to the “vowel points”) that indicated the doubling of a consonant—the Hebrew equivalent of *qnnm* rather than *qnm*.

9. Ibid., 166.

10. Ibid., 108.

11. For a photograph of a basket-shaped Iraqi boat with flexible ribs of twigs, see Finkel, *The Ark Before Noah*, 337.

Both the vowels and the doubled letters had to be supplied by the reader, making the oral (and aural) difference between *qinim* and *qinnim*. Only much later (1,500 years or so), between the seventh and tenth centuries CE, were the “points” added to the text. These additional marks were inserted beneath or above a consonant to supply the following vowel, and within a consonant (in this case the Hebrew letter *nun*) to reinforce its sound. This latter use of a “point” (Heb. *dagesh*) had the effect of doubling the letter into which it was inserted,¹² making a subtle difference in pronunciation but a profound difference in meaning. In effect, the presence of this single dot changed a very large reed-basket boat into an equally large, longer-than-wide, wooden boat half the length of the *Titanic*. Conversely, the absence of the dot did the opposite; it turned Noah’s ark into a gigantic reed basket.

The traditionally understood, intended meaning of the original author(s) of the Genesis Flood narrative was established by a group of scholars facile in Biblical Hebrew who read, interpreted, and standardized the transcription of the text in the tenth century CE, more than a millennium and a half after the narrative was first committed to writing. They may, however, have been influenced by the wording of the Septuagint, a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Koine Greek (the language of the New Testament), prepared in Alexandria in the late third century BCE (more than a millennium closer to the original writing) by a group of Jewish scholars (allegedly seventy or seventy-two in number, hence the name Septuagint, from the Latin *septuaginta*). The tenth-century CE scholars known as

^{12.} The doubling of the “n” is indicated in Hebrew by the difference between *ו* and *וֹ*. When a *dagesh* (a centrally located dot) is inserted into the Hebrew letter “n” (“*nun*”) it becomes “nn.” Thus “reeds” becomes “nests” (or, in various translations, “rooms,” “cells,” or sometimes, “compartments”).

Masoretes copied the available manuscripts and standardized the way the Hebrew letters were written, producing what is known as the “Masoretic text.” Their task was inevitably interpretive, since there was no way of knowing for certain how the text was originally pronounced and therefore what it originally meant.

Most English translations have followed the Septuagint and the Masoretic text—beginning with William Tyndale’s Old Testament (TOT, 1530) and the King James Version (KJV, 1611) and continuing to the Revised Standard Version (RSV, 1952) and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, 1989), the *Torah* of the Jewish Publication Society (JPS, 1962), the New International Version (NIV, 1978, 2011), and the Common English Bible (CEB, 2011). Thus the consensus has been that the original Hebrew word was pronounced with the double “*nn*,” instead of the single “*n*,” hence *qinnim* (“nests,” “cells,” or “rooms”) rather than *qinim* (reeds). On the other hand, comparatively recently the Jerusalem Bible (JB, 1966), the New English Bible (NEB, 1970), the Revised English Bible (REB, 1989), and the *Five Books of Moses* (Schocken, 1983) reflect the judgment that the original author intended “*n*”—hence *qinim*, “reeds.”

The modern reader may well protest, “My Bible doesn’t say anything about reeds,” and this is probably the case, because as already noted, almost all modern translations have followed the Septuagint and the Masoretic text.

The various translations of Genesis 6:14 mentioned above read as follows:

“You shall make the ark with *nests* [Gk. *nossias*] and shall bituminize it within and without” (Septuagint, late third century BCE).

“Make thee an ark of pine tree and make *chambers* in the ark and pitch it within and without with pitch” (TOT,

1530 [with modernized spelling]).

“Make thee an ark of gopher¹³ wood; *rooms* shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch” (KJV, 1611).

“Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make it an ark with *compartments*, and cover it inside and out with pitch” (*Torah*, 1962).

“Make yourself an ark out of resinous wood. Make it with *reeds* and line it with pitch inside and out” (JB, 1966).

“Make yourself an ark with ribs of cypress; cover it with *reeds* and coat it inside and out with pitch” (NEB, 1970; REB, 1989).

“Make yourself an Ark of gofer wood, with *reeds* make the Ark, and cover it within and without with a covering of pitch” (Schocken, 1983).

“Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make *rooms* in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch” (NRSV, 1989).

“Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make *rooms* in it and coat it with pitch inside and out” (NIV, 1978, 2011).

“So make a wooden ark. Make the ark with *nesting places* and cover it inside and out with tar” (CEB, 2011).

Evidently the consensus interpretation of the original meaning as “nests” as a metaphor for “rooms” has seemed more congruent

^{13.} The word *gopher* (or *gofer*) is not a translation but a transliteration—that is, a reproduction of the Hebrew word in English (actually Roman) letters. This was sometimes done when the translators were uncertain about the meaning of the Hebrew word. In this case the result sometimes misleads readers who suppose the wood has something to do with the rodent gopher.

with the way a reasonable God would tell a reasonable Noah how to build a reasonable ark.

The word *qinnim* occurs a total of thirteen times in the Old Testament, and in the other twelve occasions, the context indicates that the nest of a bird is the only reasonable meaning, literally or metaphorically, and the metaphorical sense may well be the meaning here. On the other hand, because the Babylonian cuneiform Ark Tablet predates the Genesis account by as much as a thousand years, and it clearly describes a boat whose hull is constructed of reeds, the NEB/REB reading of the text may be correct. If so, it is understandable how the tradition developed otherwise, because of the difficulty of determining the original spoken Hebrew, and because the Jews in the third century BCE who translated the story of Noah into Greek, and the Masoretes who tidied up the text, all knew without any question that proper boat hulls were made of wood, not reeds.

We conclude that either reading—*rooms* or *reeds*—is plausible because the evidence available now, millennia after the text was first written, is not conclusive for one or the other.

BACK TO THE ARK TABLET

Atra-hasis continued:

*"I apportioned one finger of bitumen for her outsides;
I apportioned one finger of bitumen for her interior [?]
I had (already) poured out one finger of bitumen onto
her cabins."¹⁴*

In these three lines of the Ark Tablet a familiar item appears: a boat-building material that features prominently in the Biblical

14. Finkel, *The Ark Before Noah*, 108.

account. Noah was instructed to “coat it with pitch inside and out” (Gen. 6:14, NIV)—that is, to “bituminize it within and without” (Septuagint). Now coating a wooden boat with pitch—that is, tar—on the outside makes perfect sense: it seals the holes and cracks between the planks of the boat’s hull, and when the boat is put into the water, the water pressure forces the tar farther into each crack or hole, thus (hopefully) sealing it. However, coating the *inside* of a wooden boat with tar makes no sense at all. That is because the water pressure pushing through a crack from outside the hull would force the tar on the inside of the hull into the boat, and leaks would proliferate. Anyone who has attempted to seal the walls of a leaky basement from the inside will readily confirm this observation.

Why, then, was Noah told to coat his wooden-hulled boat with tar “inside and out”? The Babylonian cuneiform version of the Flood story may provide an answer if in the original telling it was not a wooden-hulled boat at all. The “finger” to which Atra-hasis refers is the thickness of the bitumen coating on the vessel he was building—and it was a reed-hulled boat. We have already concluded from the instructions Enki gave him that he was to build a giant, circular basket-vessel with 327 miles of coiled palm-fiber rope. Atra-hasis was, in fact, constructing an enormous “coracle”—a kind of boat that was made in ancient Mesopotamia with a frame of flexible wooden “ribs” supporting and stiffening a basketwork hull made of twisted palm-fiber and reed rope. The whole structure was then rendered waterproof by covering it with a mixture of bitumen and mud.¹⁵ Unlike a wooden-hulled boat, a coracle did require bitumen inside and out, for its hull was, in fact, made of bitumen reinforced and held in place by a reed and palm-fiber mat.

¹⁵. E. S. Stevens, *By Tigris and Euphrates* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1923), 50.

Today we would dignify such a hull by saying it is composed of a “composite material”—something like fiberglass in which glass fiber is held in place and reinforced by a resin that is applied “inside and out.” If the constituent parts are carefully chosen, composite materials can be simultaneously tough and flexible—desirable characteristics for the hulls of marine vessels. In fact, such material made excellent boat hulls in Mesopotamia for thousands of years. The composite material called fiberglass still makes excellent boat hulls today; glass fiber– or carbon fiber-hulled yachts compete every few years for the America’s Cup.

But what of the “ribs” that both Atra-hasis and Noah are instructed to prepare? Coracles require ribs radiating out (and up) from a hub in the middle of the flat bottom of the vessel. The ribs stiffen the composite hull material while still allowing it to flex. In ancient times the ribs were typically the only part of the coracle that was made of wood. In smaller coracles the ribs were bundles of flexible twigs formed into a cylinder and sewn into the inside of the giant basket to give it structural integrity. The New English Bible translators may have correctly described an ark with ribs of cypress wood and a hull of reeds, the whole structure coated inside and out with bitumen.

A DEVELOPING *DIVINE ACTIONS* EXPLANACEPT

At this point an interesting question arises about the Genesis narrative of the Great Flood: How did it happen that the ark God instructed Noah to build was to be made of wood if, as may have been the case, the authors of Genesis were retelling, and in the process significantly modifying, Babylonian and/or Assyrian cuneiform accounts? This question invites speculation, but another and more important question needs to be seriously

addressed first: How did the petty quarrels and deceitful actions of the Babylonian and Assyrian gods get transformed into the ethical-monotheistic accounts of the Hebrew *YHWH/Elohim*? This was a God who, while credited with initiating the Flood (Gen. 6:7), seemed to have second thoughts about it, eventually promising not to do that sort of thing ever again (Gen. 9:15).

Perhaps the best way to put the available literary evidence together is to recognize that as the Hebrew nation of farmers, sheep herders, community leaders, priests, and visionaries told and retold the ancient stories that were the antecedents to the Hebrew Bible, their accounts developed to keep pace with their increasing understanding of who God was, what God did, and what God wanted for them. In that process over hundreds of years, the narratives underwent modifications that kept them understandable and meaningful to the Hebrews who constituted an ever-interested but ever-changing audience. To function effectively in the development of the community's religious understanding, the narratives had to make sense. No one in the mountains of Judea had ever seen a coracle. This kind of vessel was confined to the marshes where the Tigris and the Euphrates join before flowing into the Persian Gulf.¹⁶

Farther west in the Fertile Crescent, the vessels with which the Hebrews were familiar were necessarily very different; they plied the stormy waters of the Mediterranean—or, closer to home, the sometimes equally stormy waters of the Sea of Galilee. The boats the Hebrews knew were made of wood, not basketwork. A proper boat had a bow at the front and a rudder at the back, and it travelled from one place to another usually by

16. Coracles were still built there until a few years ago, when Saddam Hussein drained the marshes and slaughtered the Marsh Arabs. The larger coracles used by the Marsh Arabs could carry thirty or more adults or an equivalent weight of livestock.

means of wind power, for these boats were equipped with sails. For Noah to save his family along with a variety of animals, he needed a big wooden boat, and that is what *YHWH* told him to build. Still, echoes of the ancient narrative persisted. Even if the compiler of the Flood narrative did not know why, he may have known that the ark was to be constructed of reeds with ribs of cypress wood and it was to be coated with bitumen “inside and out” (Gen. 6:14, NEB/REB).

SO WHAT?

Unfortunately, many readers of Scripture are uncomfortable when they hear of earlier materials (such as the Book of Jasher) that the Bible writers not only knew about but also relied upon as readily available source material that interested questioners could read for themselves (2 Sam. 1:18). The discomfort deepens with the recognition that some of these materials—as in the case of the recently published Ark Tablet—may have predated the Biblical accounts by as much as a thousand years, and may well have been part of the common knowledge of the believing community. But there is good news in remembering the role of explanacepts—categories with which humans think but rarely think about—in both the composition of the Genesis accounts of the Great Flood and in our own reading of those accounts.

Because we (correctly) regard the Bible as God’s inspired Word, whatever we think about it is automatically controlled by our *divine actions* explanacept. That was, of course, also the case with the ancient Hebrews, who had only one other category with which to understand all the reality they knew about—namely, their *human actions* explanacept. Although we now have the additional (and very useful) *natural regularities* explanacept,

we still tend to regard matters of inspiration in terms of *divine actions* because neither *human actions* nor *natural regularities* seems appropriate. We suppose, perhaps subconsciously, that those who composed the materials of Scripture were not influenced by, much less dependent on, other, “uninspired” sources of information or modes of understanding. Thus, if the Genesis narrative of the Great Flood seems to have received some of its information from an older Babylonian cuneiform Ark Tablet (or from any of the other accounts among the surviving flood stories), the concept of inspiration seems weakened and considerably less clear.

So the concept of inspiration deserves additional consideration, a task we undertake in the final chapter of this book. At the end of the detailed and lengthy examination there, we suggest that the inspired writings of the Bible were those that represented a significant development in the *divine actions* except in the community that received and preserved them. A message deemed worth preserving typically clarified, enlarged, or otherwise improved the people’s understanding of who God was, what God did, and what God wanted for them. The Flood narrative enhanced the believing community’s understanding of who God was and, in particular, what God did—and, in the case of the Flood, would not do again.

CONCLUSION

The essential message of the Genesis narrative of the Great Flood has little or nothing to do with whether the ark was a gigantic bitumen-covered basket or a wooden boat three hundred cubits (four-hundred fifty feet) long and fifty cubits (seventy-five feet) wide. Instead, the essential message, and the reason this narrative

has been preserved to enrich the life of believing communities for three thousand years, was (and is) a better understanding of God—the God who, in the midst of an unprecedented human and ecological disaster, “remembered Noah” (Gen. 8:1), and soon afterward established an “everlasting covenant” with “every living creature . . . on the earth” that “the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh” (Gen. 9:15, 16).

The Genesis narrative of the Great Flood expressed the best understanding of God then available, documenting a significant development and maturation within the receiving, recording, and preserving community of its *divine actions* explanacept—a far better understanding than any of the available alternatives. Further development followed, and that too is good news. The Bible, which is our best clue to God’s character and activity, had antecedents—both oral traditions and previously written accounts. This fact does not create a theological problem unless one’s concept of inspiration is attached to the resulting documents themselves rather than to the overall process by which God communicates to us what we need to know about *divine actions*. This is the content of theology, which is recognizably inspired when it represents a continually advancing understanding of who God is, what God does, and what God wants for us.

Accounts of the unprecedented disaster and rescue that we know as the Great Flood were developed and preserved by the ancient Hebrews as well as by other cultures preceding them and surrounding them. In the process of being told, retold, and eventually written, the accounts came to reflect the tellers’ understandings of God. Among the Hebrews, those understandings matured into the ethical monotheism that is our Judeo-Christian heritage. This process has continued for many centuries and involved many writers, as well as communities that identified certain writings to be preserved

for future generations. This multifaceted process is the reason why the Bible is better described as a “library” than as a “book”; it is a collection of documents originally composed (and later written) over hundreds of years, and reflecting an unmistakable theological development.

As the telling and retelling proceeded through the centuries, the understanding of God expanded, deepened, and matured, so that eventually a community of farmers, sheep herders, community leaders, and visionaries was transformed into the nation of Israel—a chosen, “priestly” nation—and the Hebrew Bible was completed—to be subsequently fulfilled and transformed by the definitive revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth.



*“The water rose above the mountains,
covering them fifteen cubits deep.”*

—Gen. 7:20 (OHV)

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHY A “GLOBAL FLOOD” MODEL IS IMPOSSIBLE TO CONSTRUCT

It is commonplace on the evening news to hear a reporter speak of “a flood of Biblical proportions,” usually meaning a very large flood. But this language raises the question, How much territory would have to be covered by a flood in order to be appropriately described as one of “Biblical proportions”—a county, a state, a country, a continent? In chapter 12 we will deal with the amount of the earth’s surface that was covered by the Great Flood and the Biblical evidence that bears on this question. However, reconstructing the Flood event—modeling it conceptually—has shown itself to be an intractable problem. We will explore in this chapter some of the reasons why this has been the case. Many capable scientists and scholars, as well as their sponsoring organizations, have invested much time, effort, and money in the endeavor.

We are not sure that the typical news reporter actually wants a detailed and specific reply to our rhetorical question; however, for any reporters who care, the short answer is “none of the

above.” “But,” someone may protest, “any flood, no matter what its size—even the Biblical one—has a definite extent.” Furthermore, the water that constituted it must have come from somewhere at the start of the Flood and gone somewhere at its conclusion. There must have been a cause (or causes), and surely it should be possible to explore potential causes and rule out from further consideration those that are very unlikely. Surely our large (and ever increasing) understanding of how water in large quantities behaves will facilitate the investigation? Or will it?

Living in the twenty-first century, Ian Michael knows that an extremely large flood—a “flood of Biblical proportions”—would have to cover either the whole surface of planet Earth or at least a significant portion of it. In either case he thinks instinctively in terms of planet Earth, because he knows that he lives on a planet and thinks in planetary terms. For him this is the only possible option.

This, however, was not the case for Moshe and his contemporaries, who first heard or read about the Great Flood in the developing collection of sacred scrolls maintained by the ancient Hebrews. The Original Hearers (the OH in our OHV) did not—and could not—visualize (because they could not conceive of) a flood that covered the entire globe. Visualizing an astronomical globe, in this case a rocky sphere called Earth, was not possible for any human mind until several hundred years later. Instead, the Flood was of “Biblical proportions” because it covered the *'erets*, the *land*. And the *land* was very important. It was the basis of Moshe’s identity. Even more, it was the possibility of his very existence. It is difficult to explain the attachment of Moshe to his (his father’s, his grandfather’s, the patriarch’s) *land*. Ian Michael’s emotions when he sings the words (and hears himself sing), “The *land* of the free and the

home of the brave" or "This *land* is my *land*, this *land* is your *land*" are but a pale reflection of Moshe's attachment to his *land* of promise, his *land* given by God to his ancestor Abraham, the *land* that even today is identified as '*erets Israel*, the *land* of Israel.

That *land*, which disappeared under the Deluge, was overwhelmed by a flood of truly "Biblical proportions." The primeval waters, the fear-inspiring *Tehom* that God had confined at Creation, broke loose, and torrential outpourings of water erupted from underneath the *land*. The *raqia'*, the great protecting dome of the sky, for some reason failed. The primeval waters that were *everywhere* and *everything* prior to Creation (Gen. 1:2), the primeval waters that had been put in their place by God and kept there by the *raqia'*, were no longer confined. The *land* was overwhelmed; creation was undone by the same God who had created it in the beginning for Moshe's kin and all of the other peoples in their own lands of which Moshe had heard.

In the modern world, land is of course valued by Ian Michael. But its value to him comes nowhere near the value anciently attached to '*erets*. And that is one of the reasons why in the twenty-first century he has so much difficulty in picturing the events that the Flood narrative describes. Ian Michael thinks of a planet-enveloping Flood; Moshe did not. Because as far as he was consciously concerned, God did not create a planet; God created '*erets*, *land*. This land was now under the most severe threat it had faced since the "beginning"— "a flood of Biblical proportions," a God-initiated and God-directed catastrophe.

Given this existential challenge to Moshe's *land*, how is Ian Michael to visualize it in terms of a planetary globe, universal gravitation, and deep space? When he tries to picture it in his mind or draw it on paper, he discovers it is truly a "mission impossible." Modern pictures of a world globe in the grip of a

Flood of “biblical proportions” are not only abject failures; they do not even rise to the level of being wrong.

In one such illustration, typical of the genre, a boisterous, un-bordered ocean is pictured with ominous clouds overhead and flashes of lightning in the distance. A small, blue, cloud-swathed globe floats just to the left of center. Because its surface displays the outline of North and South America, the sphere is easily recognizable as planet Earth. Such a scene was of course unimaginable by Moshe; it was quite literally inconceivable. He could not conceptualize outer space filled with an endless ocean (he knew nothing of outer space), much less a planet floating on that ocean-in-space (he knew nothing of planets). He could not have connected his beloved *land* with the globe in the center of the picture. Truth be told, Ian Michael cannot really conceive of it either. It is even more preposterous for his twenty-first-century mentality because the ocean, not directly attached to the earth’s surface, must be in outer space. Having gone to college, he knows that it would be impossible for such an ocean, no matter how large, to exist for more than a fraction of a second in the hard vacuum that exists there.

But what is the artist to do? Moshe was unaware of the effect of gravity on a liquid such as water, and he was equally unaware of the globe we know as our planet. If presented with a planet whose surface was obscured by water (a global Flood?) his immediate question would be, “Why doesn’t the water fall off?” followed by, “Where is my *land* in that picture?”

But why can’t a twenty-first century Ian Michael conceive a coherent picture of what so gripped the imagination of the ancient Hebrews? After all, Moshe and his tribe must have visualized the Great Flood and visualized it well, else their description of it would not have survived its multiple copyings over thousands of years. The verbal description in Genesis still

has such a hold on Ian Michael's imagination that thousands of years later he still finds it to be a gripping description of an (almost) unimaginable catastrophe.

Ian Michael cannot illustrate Moshe's description of the Great Flood because of the difference between the explanacepts with which Moshe described it thousands of years ago and the very different set of explanacepts with which Ian Michael reads the Flood narrative and attempts to picture it in the twenty-first century. Without realizing it, Ian Michael conceives of a Great Flood as water deep enough to submerge the continents, covering the entire globe and held there by gravity. He assumes that Moshe did too, and that is where the impossible-to-solve problem has its source.

The primeval waters of *Tehom* continually threatened Moshe's *land* and would (if God did not constantly guard against it) return it to a pre-Creation state in which he and his people could not survive. Not so for Ian Michael. He has no concerns whatsoever about *Tehom*, and he doesn't worry about the *raqia'* failing to hold back the *Tehom*. Indeed, he is pretty sure that there is no such reality as a *Tehom*, and he is quite sure that there is no *raqia'* either. In fact, every day he uses global-positioning satellites to find his way to work. He conceives of the Great Flood as a description of how massive amounts of water for a time overwhelmed and possibly reshaped the continents of planet Earth. Because his explanacepts (including *natural regularities*) are so different from Moshe's, Ian Michael's attempts to illustrate Moshe's Great Flood (or to interpret illustrations created by others) are nonsensical, even to Ian Michael himself.

A more immediate example of a similar disconnect between two sets of explanacepts may help to clarify the problem Ian Michael faces when he reads an ancient "forwarded e-mail" and attempts to make twenty-first-century sense of it. Until relatively

recently, the populations that lived in northern climes were obsessed with the motions of the sun. They invested enormous quantities of time and energy in worrying about the possibility that, as winter progressed, the sun might go ever lower in the sky and eventually disappear forever. Thousands of stone circles in England, Scotland, and Wales testify to the importance these peoples attached to the motions of the sun, stars, and planets. Scandinavian sagas are explicit about the sacrifices that had to be offered lest the dark and chill of winter descend into eternal night and unending cold. In Ireland's Boyne River valley, to this day there are huge dirt mounds with internal stone-lined passageways oriented to the winter and summer solstices. Other passages in yet other mounds identify the spring and autumn equinoxes. Christmas, which we have (happily) turned to other purposes, originally celebrated the first detectable astronomical evidence that the sun was in fact returning and that permanent night and eternal cold had been averted once again.

The possible descent of an eternal night when the sun disappears from view and never returns doesn't bother Ian Michael or the rest of us at all. Why not? Are we braver or more carefree than they? Of course not. We have seen diagrams of our solar system, and we believe them to be correct. We have seen our planet Earth hanging in space as a tiny, fragile, blue, cloud-swathed sphere. We know that the sun is huge compared to our earth, and that, relative to the earth, it does not move. As a result we cannot get worked up over the possibility that a sun getting lower and lower in the winter sky might be a prelude to its permanent disappearance. Experiencing such a fear is for us quite literally impossible. Reading the old northern sagas, we can appreciate their literary merit, but we cannot identify with the emotional experience of those who listened to them by an open fire in a lodge stocked with

provisions for a long winter that, it was hoped, would end well but could potentially last forever.

For Ian Michael to recreate a picture of what the Flood narrative describes is a hopeless task if he insists on staying in his twenty-first-century world while making the attempt. But he could try instead to enter Moshe's world and experience the Great Flood as Moshe experienced it each time he heard the Flood narrative read or recited. If Ian Michael were willing to do this, all sorts of perplexing questions would cease to exist. The source of the water would not be a problem; it had been there since before Creation. The primeval waters under the *land* were a more-than-adequate supply—to say nothing of the waters above, held in place by the dome (*raqia'*) of the sky. The channels through which those ancient reservoirs could discharge their unlimited supply of water were no problem because “the primeval waters burst forth, and the floodgates of the sky were opened” (Gen. 7:11, OHV). Where the water went when the Flood ended would no longer be a problem either; by means of a great wind God returned the waters to the places assigned to them on the second day of Creation, above the *dome* (Gen. 1:7) and below the *land* (Exod. 20:4). Living in the modern world, Ian Michael might well puzzle over how a wind could possibly dry out a water-logged planet Earth, since he knows that when water evaporates, it sooner or later returns as rain. A wind, no matter how strong, does not get rid of the water; it simply changes its form from liquid to vapor and moves it around on the surface of the planet. But in Moshe's world there was no such problem; the idea of a hydrologic cycle was yet many centuries in the future.

One of the biggest challenges that Ian Michael encounters on entering Moshe's world is that “the water rose above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep” (Gen. 7:20, OHV). If Ian Michael isn't completely immersed in Moshe's

world, he will visualize water approximately twenty-three feet above Mount Everest—a layer of water more than twenty-nine thousand feet deep surrounding the earth. But if he is successfully acculturated into the ancient Hebrew world, he will visualize his sacred *land* covered with a layer of water that extends to the horizon in all directions—and he will know that there, at the horizon, the *dome* contained the waters of the Flood and that “all flesh died that moved on the *land*—birds, farm animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the land, and all human beings” (v. 21, OHV).

But if Ian Michael cannot successfully visualize a “flood of Biblical proportions,” can he study it with his tools of twenty-first-century science? Is it possible to recreate a scientific model of the Flood? Our answer is a decisive “No.” We believe the task is impossible because Ian Michael the scientist would have to insist that the water described so vividly in the Biblical narrative was H₂O (di-hydrogen oxide) that came from somewhere accessible to scientific investigation, such as aquifers or water-laden atmospheric shells. As he does not possess a *divine actions* explanacept capable of including a *Tehom*, Ian Michael the scientist has to insist that anything to do with water must be explained by *natural regularities*. However, since the Flood narrative identifies *Tehom*—the primeval waters—as the source from whence the water came, he cannot even get started on his quest for a scientific explanation of the Flood described in the Genesis narrative.

Caused directly by God, it was an unimaginable disaster that came close to wiping out all human and animal life. The salvation of Noah, his family, and representatives of various animal species would qualify as a miracle by our terminology—a beneficial event that cannot be explained by what we presently understand about *natural regularities*. But what about the disastrous Flood itself?

According to the Biblical account, God explicitly takes credit for causing it. He reminds Noah that he had promised to send it (Gen. 6:17) and that he has made good on his promise (Gen. 7:23). Then God evidently thinks better of having sent it and promises not to do that again (Gen. 9:11, 15). Ian Michael's idea of *miracle* is not nearly big enough to encompass this discordant set of actions on God's part.

And then what of the water that caused so much death and destruction? The Flood accounts tell him that God sent that too. "For my part, I am going to bring a flood of water on the land, to destroy from under the sky all flesh in which is the breath of life. Everything that is on the land will die" (Gen. 6:17). God sending a Flood of water to destroy everything that is on the land fits very awkwardly in Ian Michael's category of *miracle*, if it fits at all. The water of the Flood is an agent of unprecedented death and destruction. Can such a catastrophe caused by God be considered a *miracle*? But if it is not a *miracle*, what is it?

Ian Michael the scientist has even less success in trying to explain the water by his understanding of *natural regularities*. Perhaps a shell of water held above the surface of planet Earth that collapsed? Or maybe a gargantuan water-bearing aquifer beneath the surface of the Earth that erupted? He is reasonably certain that neither possibility is remotely realistic if what he knows about science in the present is also true for the past. So science, applying the *regularities of nature*, does not work either. As a consequence, it is not surprising that modeling the Flood on the assumption that there must be some set of physical laws that will explain it is a task that has not been successful yet and is unlikely ever to succeed.

The Great Flood was an event described for listeners in a world in which memorable events (like all other events) were the result of *human actions* and/or *divine actions*—and this event

was clearly in the latter category because it could not have been in the former one. Any modern attempt to describe that event will be an attempt to model it in a world in which memorable events in *nature* are explained by *science*, and if that fails, by *miracle*. The task of Ian Michael the scientist (and Christian) is doomed from the start.

So why does he keep trying? Conferences are held, speeches are given, and books are written—all based on the assumption that more research projects, the explorations of more geological layers, and/or the recovery of more fossils will enable Ian Michael the scientist and his colleagues to create a coherent intellectual model of the Great Flood. This model, it is further assumed, will explain the various disconnects between statements in the Bible and a host of scientific observations about the workings of the world, the solar system, and the universe beyond. Ian Michael persists in this task, at least in part, because he is in the habit of ignoring what the text itself says. As the account in Genesis unfolds, the rain comes down, the water rises, the *land* disappears; and scientifically informed believers automatically categorize what is happening as a catastrophe in the realm of *nature*. The text, however, explicitly says otherwise: God said, “‘For my part, I am going to bring a flood of water on the land, to destroy from under the sky all flesh’” (Gen. 6:17).

From start to finish the Flood was God’s Flood. To call it Noah’s Flood is a literary mistake. It is worse than that; it is a theological blunder. “Flood geology” is an attempt to explain and account for a divinely initiated event in a two-explanacept world as if it were an event in our present three-explanacept world, using our understanding of *natural regularities*. This is indeed a “mission impossible” that should never have been attempted. The sooner it is abandoned, and the time, effort, and money put to more promising endeavors, the better.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TOWARD A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF THE FLOOD: GOOD NEWS ABOUT GOD

THE PROBLEM

Juxtaposing “Christian theology,” “the Flood,” and “good news about God” may seem like an odd way to begin this chapter, but the combination suggests exactly what we hope to accomplish. Theology is, after all, quite literally “God talk” (from Greek *theos*, “God,” and *logos*, “word”). It is thinking and speaking about God—including God’s relation to other reality, especially human reality. Specifically *Christian* theology is thinking and speaking about God in light of the Christ event—God incarnate in and as Jesus of Nazareth. As such, Christian theology says very positive things about God. That is why we Christians often refer to our understanding of God as the gospel, “the good news.”

Throughout this chapter and the next, the terms *Flood* and *Great Flood* refer to the Flood narrative in Genesis 5:32–9:17, considering the extant Hebrew text just as it is, without referring directly to the related literary, historical, and scientific questions we have discussed earlier in this book. Matters of

translation of the Biblical text, however, will be addressed when they are relevant.

The principal question that confronts us in relation to the Flood is whether “good news about God” can emerge from a careful consideration of God’s role in the greatest catastrophe in human history—and if so, how. The answer is not immediately obvious. There are, however, many reasons to believe that a search for this answer will be very much worthwhile; after all, has not the story as a story survived for more than two millennia? During that time it has delighted untold generations of children with visions of a bearded gentleman with his wife by his side, supervising a double line of animals as they enter the ark. Typically, the number of animals is so large that the ends of the two columns disappear into the distance. A little while later that same couple can be seen peering over the edge of the ark with two giraffes or a couple of elephants looming over their heads (carnivores are never pictured looming over Noah and his wife). All in all, for Sabbath School or Sunday School children, it is a great story, complete with visual aids.

It is well to remember, however, that it was not children who copied and recopied the Flood narrative and thus preserved it for thousands of years; it was adults in successive believing communities who invested the enormous amount of time and effort that the task required. Surely they were doing it for deeper reasons than entertaining children—reasons that had to do with seeing God more clearly and understanding God better. And that is exactly what we today label theology. The Bible as a whole is essentially the story of the Creator in relation to the creation. It is not primarily a collection of “tales for tots”—nor is it history, much less science. No, from beginning to end the Bible is *theology*; it is about *God*. Furthermore, the Bible is a collection of writings that document the developing understanding of

God in the Judeo-Christian tradition. For all of these reasons, a search for the theological insights contained in the story of the Great Flood is indeed a worthwhile task given the enormous investment on the part of the copyists and transcribers. They must have seen in it insights worth preserving, and considering it carefully will almost certainly prove rewarding for us.

First, however, it will be worthwhile to identify and think about some of the problems that confront this kind of undertaking. The first problem is the scarcity of Scriptural material to undergird and inform our understanding of the Flood event. Given the length of the interwoven *YHWH* and *Elohim* accounts—eighty-six verses (Gen. 5:32–9:17), compared with fifty-six verses for the two Creation narratives combined (Gen. 1:1–2:25)—there are remarkably few subsequent references to the Flood or Noah in the remainder of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

In the Hebrew Bible there is one genealogical reference to Noah (1 Chron. 1:4), and one reference to *YHWH*'s promise that “the waters of Noah” would “never again go over the land”—a precedent for the subsequent assurance, “My steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed” (Isa. 54:9, 10). There is a double mention of Noah along with Daniel and Job as examples of those whose righteousness “would save neither son nor daughter” but “only their own lives” (Ezek. 14:14, 20). In the New Testament, the Flood is cited three times as an example of (and a warning against) ignorance of impending destruction (Matt. 24:37, 38; Luke 17:26, 27; 1 Pet. 3:20), and once as evidence of the rigor of divine judgment (2 Pet. 2:5). Noah is included among the ancestors of Jesus (Luke 3:36) and as an example of faith (Heb. 11:7). That is all the mentions of Noah and the Flood. So scientific or historical misgivings in the twenty-first century may not be the only reasons why Bible

commentators in modern times have hesitated to develop an actual *theology* of the Flood; the scarcity of Biblical materials may also have been a discouraging factor.

Through the centuries after the New Testament as well, the Christian era has seen comparatively little attention given to the theology of the Flood. Mostly the event has been regarded as a kind of divine “un-Creation”—a return to the initial state where the primeval waters and darkness reigned supreme, a time when there was a reversal of the organization of material elements that God had accomplished in the first place. In reviewing the history of Flood commentaries, some oddities stand out. For Tertullian (*ca.* 160–*ca.* 225) the Flood undergirded monogamy, and for Augustine (354–430) the ark represented the church. But even from the time of Jesus (Luke 17:27) to the present, the commonest references to the Flood event have come from preachers utilizing the unexpectedness, devastation, and unsurvivability (except in the ark) of the Flood to emphasize the need for believers to be prepared always for the end of the world (and, not incidentally, to join the community of faith).

The similarities and contrasts to corresponding traditions in other cultures are important if the Biblical story is to be properly placed in the history of religions; and the time, place, and extent of the actual events that evoked the narrative are important for an understanding of the nature and function of Scripture. Accordingly, it has often been noted that the Biblical story is monotheistic, in contrast to the multiple gods of surrounding cultures of that time, and that *YHWH* and Israel are related by a covenant that embraces election, revelation, intervention, and consummation.¹ It has also been suggested

1. Lawrence T. Geraty, “Archaeology of the Flood,” in *Understanding Genesis: Contemporary Adventist Perspectives*, ed. Brian Bull, Fritz Guy, and Ervin Taylor (Riverside, CA: Adventist Today Foundation, 2006), 187,

that the Flood story is a polemic against idolatry connected with the Canaanite fertility religions.²

THE CHALLENGE

We are convinced, however, that far and away the most important function of the Flood narrative is its role as *divine revelation*—its contribution to an understanding of the character, purposes, and actions of God. This function is a result of its disclosure of *who* God was understood to be, *how* God was understood to act, and *what* God was understood to want for human beings at the time the story of the Flood was first heard by its ancient Hebrew audience. Any serious consideration of the text needs to keep in mind the important but often ignored distinction between what the text *meant* when it was originally composed and heard (that is, what it meant to Moshe in his time and place), and what it *means* for Christians in the twenty-first century (that is, what it means to Ian Michael O'Dern here and now). In more technical language this distinction can be described as the difference between *exegesis*, which elucidates the meaning of a passage of Scripture in its original cultural and literary context, and *hermeneutics*, which proceeds from exegesis to a consideration of the current spiritual and theological significance of the passage.

Few if any Biblical narratives have been so pervasively and profoundly misunderstood down through the centuries as the narrative of the Flood. This misunderstanding by the general public—and many scholars—continues to the present. A recent

summarizing John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context: A Survey of Parallels Between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 236, 247.

2. Warren H. Johns, “Theology and Geology of the Flood: Moving Beyond Flood Geology,” in *Understanding Genesis*, 160. See also our next chapter.

American movie vividly illustrates the common misperception of the Flood narrative as the story of a hero, Noah, with feet of clay.³ Indeed, the catastrophic event itself is often identified as “Noah’s Flood” even in serious scholarship.⁴ But the actual Genesis narrative is, like the rest of Genesis and all of Scripture, first and foremost *a narrative about God*. An instructive retelling of the God story—written in language intended for children, but also instructive for adults—effectively captures the underlying purpose of Scripture:

Some people think the Bible is a book of rules, telling you what you should and shouldn’t do. The Bible certainly does have some rules in it. They show you how life works best. But the Bible isn’t mainly about what you should be doing. It’s about God and what he has done.

Other people think the Bible is a book of heroes, showing you people that you should copy. The Bible does have some heroes in it, but as you’ll soon find out, most of the people in the Bible aren’t heroes at all. They make some big mistakes, sometimes on purpose. They get afraid and run away. At times they are downright mean.

No, the Bible isn’t a book of rules or a book of heroes.

3. *Noah*, written by Darren Aronofsky and Ari Handel, directed by Aronofsky, and released by Paramount Pictures in North America, March 28, 2014.

4. See, for example, William Ryan and Walter Pitman, *Noah’s Flood: The New Scientific Discoveries about the Event That Changed History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); J. David Pleins, *When the Great Abyss Opened: Classic and Contemporary Readings of Noah’s Flood* (New York: Oxford, 2003); David R. Montgomery, *The Rocks Don’t Lie: A Geologist Investigates Noah’s Flood* (New York: Norton, 2013).

The Bible is most of all a Story. It's an adventure story about a young Hero who comes from a far country to win back his lost treasure. It's a love story about a brave Prince who leaves his palace, his throne—everything—to rescue the one he loves.⁵

In other words, the Bible is the story of God, eager and active to save.

As part of this larger story, the Flood narrative is about the relation of Ultimate Reality to created reality, and to human reality in particular. The message is about God's values, God's commitments, God's actions, and God's intentions for humanity, which together constitute the source of human meaning and the reason for hope. From the beginning to the end of the narrative, God initiates most of the action and does all of the talking, while Noah does not utter a single word, although he does what God tells him to do (except, of course, in the postscript, in which he gets drunk [Gen. 9:20–27]).

The narrative proper begins and ends with God—it begins with God's remorse over the attitudes and actions of humanity (Gen. 6:1–7), and it ends with God's commitment to preserve humanity (Gen. 9:12–17). At the beginning, God is described as surprised and disappointed by the results of Creation,⁶ and determined to obliterate the human race. This is, indeed, an unpromising place to begin our theological task:

YHWH saw that the wickedness of the humans was great

5. Sally Lloyd-Jones, *The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 14–17.

6. God's apparent surprise described in these verses is part of the Biblical evidence that can be cited in the relatively recent theological movement known as “open theism” or “open and relational theology.” See the sections below on God as “relational” and “temporal.”

in the land, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil all the time. *YHWH* was sorry that he had made humanity in the land, and it pained his heart. So *YHWH* said, “I will eliminate from the ground the human beings I have created—the people along with animals and creeping things and birds of the sky, for I am sorry that I have made them” (Gen. 6:5–7, OHV).

Even if this language is understood as an expression of regret and sadness rather than anger and vindictiveness (as indeed it should be), it still reports an unmistakable divine intention of “zoocide”—destroying not only all humanity (men, women, children, and infants) but also all subhuman animal life except aquatic species.

At this point the thoughtful reader must be amazed by this divine reaction and wonder why the God who is the epitome not only of power but also of wisdom, creativity, and love would respond with such unparalleled violence. It is often said that God “had” to do it. And this can be “explained” by an appeal to God’s justice, expressed in a post-Flood conversation with Noah:

Whoever sheds the blood of a human,
by a human shall that person’s blood be shed;
for in his own image
God [*Elohim*] made humankind (Gen. 9:6).

But was this the only option for a God whose fundamental character is love? How could it have been, if God is infinitely resourceful? Jesus explicitly disavowed the practice of retributive justice:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:38–48).

By the end of the Flood narrative, even God seems to have thought it was too much, or at least that once was enough. To Noah and his sons God promised that the Great Flood would never be repeated:

I myself am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants, and with every living creature that is with you—the birds, the farm animals, and every animal of the land with you, as many as came out of the ark, every animal of the land—I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of

a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the land (Gen. 9:9–11, OHV).

So the problem remains: how could God, whose character is definitively revealed in Jesus of Nazareth as infinite, universal, unending love, initiate the human and ecological disaster of the Great Flood in retaliation for human misbehavior, however evil and widespread?

THE SOLUTION

As it turns out, the ultimate message of the Flood narrative is not punishment and destruction but rescue and preservation. After human beings had messed up their world so thoroughly that it was headed for self-destruction, God came to the rescue, saved humanity, and promised an ongoing future. Here, as elsewhere in Scripture, the story of God is a story of salvation and therefore a story of hope. Careful reflection on the Flood narrative yields, among other insights, foundational elements of Christian truth. A selection of some of the more prominent of these elements are the principal content of the next chapter.

However, readers reflecting on the Biblical account of the Flood need first and foremost to remember where such an account had to begin—the obligatory starting point for the narrative. Neither the narrator(s) nor the listening audience had a choice in the matter. They all had only two categories of causal explanation—*human actions* and *divine actions*—with which to understand all the reality they knew. Since the Flood was an event of such magnitude that it could not possibly be explained as the result of *human actions*, it was necessarily understood as the result of *divine actions*: it was clearly and literally “an act

of God”—and had to be described as such. If an event was so extraordinarily all-encompassing that only the greatest possible power could have brought it about, and if the greatest possible power was God, there was nowhere else to begin an explanation. The Flood had to be attributed to God.⁷

Without the explanatory concept (what we have called “explanacept”) of *nature*—either as *regularities* (“natural law”) if we can identify a cause, or as *randomness* (“chance”) if we can’t—as gradually disclosed by ongoing discoveries over the next two thousand years, the only intelligible explanation of the Flood was *God*. Starting with this now problematic but then unavoidable conceptual beginning, and led by God’s Spirit, the author(s) of the narrative accomplished a truly remarkable feat.⁸ Indeed, it was such a prodigious

7. In the theological considerations that follow in this chapter and the next, the narrative is cited largely in the language of the New Revised Standard Version, with two principal exceptions. In the interest of representing the Hebrew text as accurately as possible in twenty-first-century English, the divine name *YHWH* is simply transliterated letter for letter rather than translated as “the LORD.” The name seems to have come from the Hebrew verb *hayah*, “to be,” and thus to mean something like “The One Who Is” or “The One Who Causes [Something] to Be.” In keeping with our general practice, we have translated the Hebrew word *'erets* as “land” rather than “earth” in order to retain the semantic range of the Hebrew word while avoiding encouraging the misleading image of a planet circling the sun.

8. By contrast, the movie *Noah* (mentioned previously in note 3) is a stark example of the misperceptions that result from (mis)interpreting a two-explanacept narrative as if it were a three-explanacept narrative. Writer-director Aronofsky is reported to have intended to create “an alternative version of the Genesis story—one that is more in line with ancient gnostic heresies than with the Bible,” and to have personally described the movie as “the least-biblical biblical film ever made.” J. Lee Grady, “7 of the Worst Mistakes in the Movie ‘Noah,’ ” *Charisma News*, April 10, 2014, www.charismanews.com/opinion/43454-seven-of-the-worst-mistakes-in-the-movie-noah.

accomplishment that the story and the theological insights it provided have survived to the present. This initial theology of the Flood was only a beginning, and eventually (more than a thousand years later) it was transformed by the ultimate divine revelation in Jesus of Nazareth.

The understanding thus initiated is that God, while accepting ultimate responsibility for this unimaginable disaster, disclosed at the same time a set of theologically essential and mutually related characteristics: God is relational, loving, temporal, and vulnerable. We consider each of these qualities in turn in the next chapter. That consideration will highlight several of the ways in which the story of the Flood is indeed “good news about God.”

GOD AS LOVE

The fundamental nature of God’s relation to other, God-created reality is reflected in the simple and direct affirmation that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). In other words, the fundamental nature of Ultimate Reality is infinite, unending, universal love. As obvious as this may seem to thoughtful Christians, it has often been unrecognized, ignored, or forgotten in Christian thinking and practice.

The truth that God is fundamentally love has been challenged in two major ways. Sometimes theologians as well as laypersons have wondered (and worried) whether God as Ultimate Reality is more fundamentally love or power. If God is love but not power, they ask, what assurance can we have that love will ultimately win? But we believe this is a pseudo-problem. Christians can (and should) insist on both at the same time. In God, who does not share human insecurity

and consequent egocentricity, love and power are in no way conflicting alternatives. We can say, with no logical contradiction at all, that Ultimate Reality is power that is infinitely loving and love that is ultimately powerful.

This truth is the fundamental issue in what Adventist Christians know as “the great controversy.”⁹ In simple language intended for children, the human experience of this cosmic issue comes from “the terrible lie” invented by God’s “horrible enemy,” who disguised himself as a talking snake in the Garden of Eden. Because the truth that God really *is* love and wants human beings to be happy constitutes the center of Christian theology as well as Christian spirituality, it is both appropriate and necessary for Christian thinking about the Flood to develop in the context of God’s love. For God’s love is the interpretive key—technically speaking, hermeneutical rather than exegetical—to an adequate Christian understanding of the ancient Hebrew narrative of the Flood.

So if the Great Flood is the question, love is the answer. In this realization we can discover how and why the Genesis narrative is truly “good news.” We might even call it “the gospel of the Great Flood.”

9. See, for example, the opening sentences of Ellen G. White, *The Story of the Patriarchs and Prophets* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1890), 33: “‘God is love.’ . . . His nature, his law, is love. It ever has been; it ever will be.” See also the closing sentence of Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 678: “From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love.” The truth that God is love thus constitutes the bookends of the five-volume Conflict of the Ages series. See also the opening sentence of Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1892), 9: “Nature and revelation alike testify of God’s love.”



“As long as the land endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease.”

—Gen. 8:22 (*OHV*)

CHAPTER NINE

DIMENSIONS OF GOD'S LOVE: THE FLOOD NARRATIVE AS REVELATION

THE PERSISTENT QUESTION

How can the narrative of the Flood be plausibly regarded as truly “good news”—that is, as a revelation of God’s infinite love—when its predominant content is the destruction of all but an extremely small number of the living inhabitants of the *land*?

Our first response to this plausible and persistent question is that the *relationality*, *temporality*, and *vulnerability* of God underscored in the Flood narrative are all actual dimensions of God’s love. Furthermore, each of them has a reciprocal relationship to God’s love. With regard to *relationality*, love is obviously a particular kind of interpersonal relationship, and this love both presupposes and enhances relationality. Similarly, with regard to *temporality*—by which we mean the experience of past, present, and future (not to be confused

with *temporariness*)—love presupposes the possibility of its active expression, which in turn presupposes temporality. At the same time, love gives temporality its most important meaning, and God’s love gives human temporality its ultimate meaning. With regard to *vulnerability*, genuine love by its very nature entails a willingness to risk—to risk rejection and/or betrayal, as well as the pain of harm to the beloved; and God’s infinite, universal, and unending love evokes in return the vulnerability of trust (which is also a risk).

Our second response is that because God’s love embraces and enhances all reality throughout all time, the context within which God acts is totally comprehensive. This means that the events God initiates (or does not prevent) will *in the long run* result in the greatest fulfillment and happiness for the whole of God’s created reality. As counterintuitive as it may seem, the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) was right: in the long run, this really is “the best of all possible worlds.”¹ The relevance here of the slogan of nineteenth-century utilitarian philosophy, “The greatest good for the greatest number,” is explained by the comprehensiveness of our context—eternity—and a Christian understanding of “good.” In the Biblical Hebrew world, furthermore, the most basic idea of “judgment” and “justice” was not *retribution* but rather *rectification* and *restoration*. The role of a judge was not primarily to determine guilt and punishment, as is usual in the modern world, but to *make things right*, which is precisely what the Flood was understood to accomplish in the face of prevailing and comprehensive evil.

1. Gottfried Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, 1710.

GOD AS RELATIONAL

The Flood narrative begins with a memorable, although disconcerting, affirmation of God's intimate involvement with human existence. Specifically, God was profoundly distressed by what had become of the original Creation and regretted having created humanity in the first place: “*YHWH* saw that the wickedness of humans was great in the land, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil all the time. *YHWH* was sorry that he had made humans on the land, and it pained his heart” (Gen. 6:5, 6, OHV). So, according to the beginning of the narrative (and subsequently reiterated, v. 17), *YHWH* resolved to eliminate “from the land” not only almost all human life but almost all animal life as well.

The next sentence, however, suggests a possible softening of the traditional interpretation of the text as an expression of divine anger and outrage: “And Noah found favor in *YHWH*'s eyes” (v. 8, OHV). According to its specific contexts, the ubiquitous Hebrew conjunction *w*^e at the beginning of this sentence is variously translated as “and,” “but,” “now,” or “then” and is sometimes left untranslated to conform to English literary style. Of these variants, for its thousands of occurrences the English coordinating conjunction “and” is by far the most common translation. Here, however, most English versions read “but,” following William Tyndale’s Old Testament, which doubles the adversative sense with “but yet.” At the risk of “sweating the small stuff,” we want to defend our conviction that in light of the entire narrative, here the coordinating “and” is preferable to the adversative “but.”

From the very beginning, divine rescue was part of the story; it was where the story was going. At the middle of the narrative, it became explicit: “And God remembered Noah

and all the wild animals and all the farm animals that were with him in the ark" (Gen. 8:1, OHV). The Hebrew word translated "remembered" (*zakar*), particularly in contexts such as this, meant more than simply "recalling" or "thinking about." It was covenant language that expressed faithfulness—as in the commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy" (Exod. 20:8); in the assurance that God "has remembered his holy covenant" (Luke 1:72); and in the Southern gospel song, "Do, Lord, Remember Me."² Here in the Flood narrative, God was acting in accordance with the earlier promise to Noah (Gen. 6:18), so "remembered Noah" meant "went into action to address Noah's situation." This divine trajectory, which shaped the whole narrative, ended with the promise that life would be preserved by an ever-faithful God (Gen. 9:11, 15). This is truly good news—for us as well as for the narrative's original hearers.

As the interwoven narrative continued, God (in this case *Elohim*) interacted with Noah and the rest of creation to accomplish the ultimate divine purpose. "I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female" (Gen. 6:18, 19). God is never a mere observer or judge of created reality, but always an active partner and participant—facilitating the good (the fulfillment of created possibilities) and restraining the evil (the distortion and subversion of those possibilities)—usually behind the scenes and under the radar.

God thus constantly interacts with created reality to fulfill the divine purpose—not by imposition but by the immanent operation of the Spirit, attracting and encouraging both

2. Author unknown.

human beings and the natural order to their fulfillment.³ The rescue, furthermore, was as comprehensive as the devastation: “And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female” (v. 19).

The Flood itself was described as an unprecedented catastrophe (in verse 17, Septuagint, the word is *kataklysmos*) caused directly by God. Before the emergence of the concept of *nature*, it could not have been explained in any other way. It involved a downpour for an extended period as “the windows of the heavens were opened”—language that for us refers simply to rain from the sky, but which for the author and original audience referred to *divine* reality. Together with the declaration that “the fountains of the great deep burst forth” (Gen. 7:11), this language indicated “a striking reversal of the second day of creation, when a vault was erected to divide the waters above from the waters below.”⁴ For us (as for the author and original audience) the theological point is that God leads the created order toward fulfilling the divine intention—another kind of divine interaction—with created reality.

This is indeed good news. God—the Ultimate Reality—is no mere observer of created reality. God *cares*. This is why finite human reality, even an individual human being, has—for better and for worse—transcendent meaning. In other words, *I matter*. By my values, attitudes, decisions, and actions, *I make a difference*.

3. Process theology, based on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, provides an evocative metaphor with its notion of “luring” toward ideal fulfillment. See also Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2015).

4. Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 32n.

To the Hebrews, surrounded as they were by other cultures with other gods who, as nearly as we can tell from surviving records, were not the slightest bit interested in relating to humans in this kind of manner, the good news was nothing less than mind-boggling.

GOD AS TEMPORAL

Whether known as *YHWH* or *Elohim*, the God of the Flood narrative is represented explicitly as eminently temporal—experiencing surprise, regretting past events, planning the future, making commitments. So obvious is the divine temporality in the Biblical narrative that one wonders how so astute and profound a theologian as Augustine of Hippo (354–430) could have been so wrong as to make temporality a decisive contrast between Creator and creation.⁵ Developing this idea a century later, the Christian philosopher Boëthius (480–524) used the concepts of “divine timelessness” and “eternal present” to make divine foreknowledge and human free will logically coherent.⁶ The notion of divine timelessness (or “timeless eternity”) dominated Western Christian thinking for 1,300 years—until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the philosophies of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) in Germany⁷ and Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) in England and America.⁸ More recently the notion of divine temporality has been

5. See Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. II.

6. See Boëthius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, bk. 5.

7. See, for example, G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford, 1977).

8. A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corrected ed. (New York: Free Press, 1978).

highlighted by the movement known as “open theism” or “open and relational theology.”⁹

One might try to defend the idea of divine timelessness against the obvious implications of many elements in the Biblical narratives of Creation, the Flood, and the history of Israel by noting that language about God here and elsewhere is necessarily anthropomorphic and ought not to be taken as simply literal. This argument is at least half right: all human language about Ultimate Reality is necessarily nonliteral and imprecise, and to that extent imperfect. But Christian piety and theology insist on a “God who acts,”¹⁰ and the idea of “timeless action” (as distinct from “timeless being”) is self-referentially incoherent. It just doesn’t make sense. Furthermore, Aristotle’s conception of God spending eternity not acting but simply contemplating the divine perfection seems rationally coherent, but it is religiously and philosophically useless. A God who speaks and acts—who creates, incarnates, and consummates—while also answering prayers, cannot be logically conceived as timeless. The divine eternity is not timelessness in which nothing happens, but

9. See, for example, Richard Rice, *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (Nashville, TN: Review and Herald, 1980), republished as *God's Foreknowledge & Man's Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985); and John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998). See also Clark H. Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994); David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996); Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000); Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001); Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*.

10. See G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (Napierville, IL: Allenson, 1958).

infinite time that encompasses all happenings.¹¹

This, too, is good news.

GOD AS VULNERABLE

Neither the Flood narrative nor anything else in Scripture suggests that God is vulnerable ontologically, as if Ultimate Reality could somehow be threatened with extinction. Those who in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries proclaimed the “death of God”¹² were not saying that God no longer existed, but rather that the *idea* of God was dead and that belief in God was no longer possible for intelligent, informed persons in the modern world. On the other hand, it is clear that precisely because God is love, God is indeed susceptible to the pain of rejection and also participates in the suffering of persons beloved (as parents do in relation to their children, and friends often do in relation to each other). This is what we mean by God’s “vulnerability.”¹³

At the beginning of the Flood narrative we learn that *YHWH* was profoundly sorry for having made humans “in the land.” Indeed, God “was pained in his heart” (Gen. 6:6, OHV). As we have suggested, readers have often concluded this means that God experienced outrage or “temperamental anger.”¹⁴

11. See Fritz Guy, “God’s Time: Infinite Temporality and the Ultimate Reality of Becoming,” *Spectrum* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2001), 19–28.

12. For a classic statement, see Friedrich Nietzsche, “God Is Dead,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954), 95, 96.

13. Compare Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

14. Pleins, *When the Great Abyss Opened*, 34; see also 29, 30.

After all, God's response was to declare, "I will eliminate . . . the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them" (v. 7, OHV). But in the light of God's infinite love, we sense in these pain-filled words a different meaning—namely, overwhelming grief that the human beings God had freely created and profoundly loved had so misused themselves and each other that it seemed obvious to the human narrator that the most reasonable thing for God to do was to start over (and take another risk) with a new race of human beings. But the message of the narrative as a whole is that God came to the rescue and saved the human race.

The idea that the infinite God is vulnerable to the effects of human action becomes both rationally understandable and theologically necessary in two ways. In the first place, the very process of creating (and respecting the integrity of) morally free beings entails, as every parent knows, self-limitation and vulnerability. It is, as the beginning of the Flood narrative vividly demonstrates, a profound risk, even for the Ultimate Source of all reality.¹⁵ In the second place, to love truly is to care deeply; and to care is to make oneself vulnerable both to potential rejection of one's love and to possible harm to the beloved (self-inflicted or otherwise).

In the Biblical narrative of the Flood, *YHWH/Elohim* is vulnerable on both counts. The opposite and venerable theological idea of an *invulnerable* God—the formal theological terminology is “the *impassibility* of God”—originated not in Hebrew or Christian Scripture but in Greek philosophy. The word *impassible* comes from the Latin *passibilis* and is related to the English “impassive.” As a theological term, “impassible” means that God is not subject

¹⁵. Hence Sanders's significant title, *The God Who Risks* (see note 9).

to creaturely passions and cannot be affected by any other reality. Logically the divine quality of impassibility is derived from the quality of *aseity*, the ontological independence (or better, self-dependence) of God as Ultimate Reality: the reality of God does not depend on any reality other than God's own reality.

The basic idea goes back at least to Parmenides (*ca.* 515–*ca.* 445 BCE) and was promulgated by Plato (*ca.* 427–*ca.* 347). The reasoning went like this: the more real something is, the more perfect it is; and the more perfect it is, the less changeable it is, since change implies either an increase or decrease in perfection. Because God is by definition both ultimate reality and absolute perfection, God is absolutely changeless and immutable, and therefore invulnerable—that is, *impassible*. The logical flaw in this reasoning is that change does not necessarily entail an increase or decrease of perfection. Something or someone can become *different* without becoming more or less *perfect*. Unfortunately, however, this flawed reasoning was adopted into early Christian theology and remained prominent for centuries.

The narrative of the Flood includes the truth that God can be affected not only negatively, evoking sorrow and regret, but also positively, evoking satisfaction and joy. God's covenant with humans is “the focal point of the entire Flood story. . . . The Deluge is only the occasion for achieving Elohim's real aim: to be a God who has binding relationships with the world and its human populations.”¹⁶

So, yes, the Genesis narrative of the Great Flood was—and

¹⁶ Ed Noort, “The Stories of the Great Flood: Notes on Gen. 6:5–9:17 in Its Context of the Ancient Near East,” in Florentino García Martínez and Gerard P. Luttikhuijsen, eds., *Interpretations of the Flood, Themes in Biblical Narrative* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 17, 18.

is—“good news.” It is not primarily a story of the undoing of creation and a return to the original chaos accomplished by *human* (and perhaps *divine*, that is, demonic) rebellion and violence, although it can obviously be interpreted that way. To the contrary, we are convinced that the story of the Flood is primarily a story of God’s active commitment to the possibility of a human reality that fulfills God’s eternal purpose for the world. And this is not a new idea; it goes back to Talmudic interpretations of the Torah:

The flood as an instrument of judgment may seem to be out of step with the ordering of creation as laid down in Genesis 1, but in actuality, according to the rabbis, it is the logical counterpart to the world’s ordered structures. Although disruption seems at times to gain the upper hand, there is an ordered dimension to the world that is breaking through even in times of chaos. God’s ultimate intention is to bring order out of the chaos.¹⁷

“Bringing order out of chaos” is an apt summary of Genesis 1, which describes a transformation from reality that was “formless and empty” (v. 2) to reality that was “very good” and functioned very well (v. 31). So the Flood narrative can be properly understood as describing, not an “undoing” of Creation but another phase of the creative process of “bringing order out of chaos.”

More good news! Instead of talking so much about the danger of *disappointing* God, we Christians would do well to talk more about the invigorating possibility of *enhancing* God’s *shalom*.

¹⁷. Pleins, *When the Great Abyss Opened*, 33.

CONCLUSION

If, as we insist, the Biblical narrative of the Great Flood is first and foremost a story about God, and more particularly a story of God's love in action to rescue humanity from disaster and bring order out of chaos, we would be remiss if we ended our consideration of the theology of the Flood without considering and responding to the more traditional and typical view of its meaning. We quote Henri Blocher, a respected Old Testament scholar:

The universality of the scourge corresponds to the universality of the corruption. The text also brings out this idea of a correspondence by repeating the same verb: "Now the earth was corrupt . . . for all flesh had corrupted their way. . . . Behold, I will *destroy* [the same Hebrew verb] them with the earth" [Gen. 6:11–13]. It is as if he [God] were applying the *lex talionis*, or at least the same logic. Since men have plunged the world into moral chaos, they will be punished with physical chaos. The flood has thus the character of a just retribution.¹⁸

In response, we note first that to regard the Great Flood as "a just retribution" is tantamount to making God the perpetrator of the mother of all genocides, which is theologically, spiritually, and morally untenable. (Ironically, this issue does not seem to bother Biblical literalists who object, quite understandably, to the waste and brutality of an evolutionary Creation.) There must be a better Christian theological understanding of the narrative. Second, we recall that the authors of the combined

18. Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 205, 206.

Flood narrative had only two causal categories with which to understand all phenomena and experience—*human actions* and *divine actions*—with the result that since the Flood was obviously beyond anything that humans could produce, it had to be understood as direct divine action. That is where the narrative had to start. Third, we note that actions, good and evil, have consequences, and that evil is ultimately self-destructive. This too is part of the meaning of the narrative.

The goal of theology is to generate, if possible, better ways of understanding and expressing religious beliefs—of either an individual or a community. The single most fundamental Christian theological affirmation is the simple, profound, and personally revolutionary idea that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). For a theology of the Flood to be authentically Christian it must be not only related to, but actually grounded in, the ultimate truth that God is love. But at the time of the Flood event itself, theological conversation was just getting started. It is, however, both inevitable and appropriate for Christians to read and hear the ancient narrative of the Flood through Christian eyes and ears, and to discern meanings that became apparent only in the Christ event. It is also both inevitable and appropriate now (provided we are conscious of what we are doing) to read and hear the narrative through twenty-first-century eyes and ears. But in internalizing the story we must avoid the danger of demanding from the ancient text any truth that was not then available. That is, we must neither criticize the text for its theological “deficiency,” nor try to remedy the “deficiency” by reading into the ancient text a level of theological understanding that was not (and could not have been) there.

Here the covenant language in the Biblical narrative is of central importance: “I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark” (Gen. 6:18). The hallmark

of love in action is putting forth effort—acting, working—for the betterment of the beloved. In the Biblical narrative we hear of God going into action to benefit the human and animal occupants of the ark. More than a thousand years later, the author of the fourth Gospel could write, with a far better understanding and appreciation of who God is, what God does, and what God wants for us, “For God so loved the world that he gave his unique Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16, authors’ translation).

CHAPTER TEN

HOW THE FLOOD NARRATIVE ILLUSTRATES THE FORMATION OF AN “INSPIRED” BIBLE

We Christians commonly believe that Holy Scripture—the Bible—began with the divine inspiration of Hebrew authors. Pinning down the precise nature and significance of “inspiration,” however, is difficult. For some believers, Scripture, by virtue of being inspired, is inerrant and infallible—without mistakes or defects of any kind, although the phenomena of the existing text (such as factual discrepancies among the four Gospels) make this and similar definitions of inspiration problematic. For others, *inspired* means that the words of Scripture are divine words, chosen by God and communicated to the writers (and translators?) of the Bible—verbal inspiration. For yet others, the two concepts are combined. It is sometimes explained that God spoke, the writers wrote, and the text they produced was inerrant—but what the authors actually wrote has been lost, so that we no longer have access to the original “autographs.” But evidence that no longer exists is not evidence; evidence must be *evident, accessible, discernible*.

One Biblical passage refers explicitly to the concept of inspiration—the well-known New Testament declaration, “All scripture is God-inspired and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in right living, so that God’s person may be competent, equipped for every kind of good work” (2 Tim. 3:16, 17, authors’ translation). Sometimes the Greek word that expresses divine “inspiredness” (*theopneustos*) is translated literally as “God-breathed,” but we still do not have a precise definition of inspiration that will help us recognize any particular composition as “inspired” or “not inspired.” What, exactly, is different about—and thus distinctive of—a document that is “God-inspired”? Since the Greek word occurs only once in the New Testament and has no Hebrew counterpart, we are at an etymological dead end. There is no point in pursuing this particular venture any further.

So we must look for clarification in a different direction. We will explore what it is about Holy (God-inspired) Scripture that has enabled it, through the centuries, to speak authoritatively for God, clarifying who God is, what God does, and what God wants for us. This will help to fill out the *divine action* explanation and perhaps enable us to achieve, if not a precise characterization of “inspiredness,” at least an awareness and understanding of the process by which a collection of writings from multiple authors over many centuries came to achieve authoritative status as “inspired” and “holy” Scripture.

In chapter 1 we noted that while dissonances in the Biblical text may occasionally perplex us, they are of considerable interest to Biblical scholars. For while the advice given cannot always be literally followed, or the circumstances described be literally harmonized, these passages are helpful in answering an entirely different question: How did writings of long ago and far away come to be Holy Scripture? We will consider how

the Flood accounts—perplexing as they may have been to the original hearers (they are still perplexing to us)—came to be an informative and essential part of Holy Scripture.

IN THE CANON OR NOT?

Many practicing Jews and Christians believe that an ancient Hebrew narrative, letter, exhortation, or tribal history must have been inspired in order to be part of the Old Testament canon.¹ That is, inspiration is regarded as a prerequisite for authority (or canonicity). While we do not know the precise conditions under which the Old Testament canon was determined (information about the canonization of the New Testament is much more extensive), we have enough information in Jewish literature to know that it was a deliberate and thoughtful process and that its early phases may well have come to fruition during the latter part of the first century CE. Some references that we no longer completely understand mention books that “soil the hands,” suggesting that that characteristic was a requirement for inclusion in the Hebrew canon. It may well have been an idiomatic expression that meant something like “too holy to be touched.” We do know, however, that some books were included in the Old Testament canon with little or no controversy, while others such as Esther, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs were included only after long and presumably vigorous debate.²

i. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Tradition in the Christian Bible*, Section C, “Scripture and Oral Tradition in Judaism and Christianity”: “‘Writings which soil the hands,’ that is ‘are sacred.’” www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html#C, accessed July 30, 2015.

2. Though the hypothetical “Council of Jamnia” may never have occurred

However the process unfolded under the Holy Spirit's guidance, we can be sure that the inclusion of a particular document was a consensus decision of a believing community. The final definition of the Old Testament canon was the culmination of a process that had been going on for hundreds of years. The community of believers had endorsed the spiritual value of certain documents (perhaps as "having an animating, enlivening or exalting influence")³ by devoting community resources to their preservation. Before the invention of printing from moveable type in the fifteenth century CE, a document survived only as long as an individual or a group was willing to copy it at regular intervals. And the task of copying was not undertaken lightly. For some religious groups it was not only an important task; it was their primary reason for existence.

We thus conclude that specific documents were selected to be preserved through the centuries because the believing community had collectively found them valuable. The process took time. Often the decision was not made during the author's lifetime, and it was only the first step in determining which documents were finally included in the canon because they were recognized as inspired and therefore authoritative. Indeed, it was probably never the case that the author of a

as a formal meeting to establish the Hebrew canon, there was certainly controversy about whether a few books like Song of Songs and Lamentations were appropriate for inclusion. See, for example, Robert C. Newman, "The Council of Jamnia and the Old Testament Canon," Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute research report no. 13 (1983), www.ibri.org/RRs/RR013/13jamnia.html; Albert C. Sundbergh Jr., "'The Old Testament of the Early Church' Revisited," in *Festschrift in Honor of Charles Speel*, Thomas J. Sienkewicz and James E. Betts, eds. (Monmouth, IL: Monmouth College, 1997), department.monm.edu/classics/Speel_Festschrift/sundbergJr.htm, accessed Nov. 29, 2016.

3. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. "inspiring."

document such as the (hypothetical) “Events of the Great Flood” had the power or opportunity to decide that his narrative was worth preserving for posterity. That decision was made by others, often much later, and reconfirmed many times during the following centuries.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE *DIVINE ACTION* EXPLANACEPT

What were the special virtues of a document that led to a desire to preserve it and a willingness to invest the necessary community resources?

As we encounter reality, we all use explanacepts—explanatory concepts—to organize, understand, and relate to the world around us. As we noted in chapters 4 and 5, the ancient Hebrews understood reality in terms of just two kinds of active agency, *human action* and *divine action*. Of these, the preeminent agency was the *divine*, sometimes understood as extending to a plurality of gods and/or demons. *Divine action* accounted for all entities and events other than those for which *human action* was the recognizable cause. Obviously *human action* did not bring the Great Flood upon the land; only *divine action* could have accomplished that.

As the ancient Hebrews processed the stories of this disaster of unprecedented severity and extent, their *divine action* explanacept must have been stretched to its limit. Although God was understood as taking full responsibility (“I will blot out from the land the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry I made them” [Gen. 6:7, OHV]), that same God not only warned Noah of the impending Flood but also

told him how to prepare to survive it (vv. 13–16). Furthermore, in the midst of the disaster God “remembered” him and the creatures with him in the ark and ended the Flood (Gen. 8:1–3). Afterwards God promised never to do such a thing again (Gen. 9:8–17). Because of the way the story of God’s Great Flood was recounted, the Hebrew generation that first heard it and all subsequent recipient generations came to view God differently. It was unequivocally God’s Flood; from start to finish the story was about *divine action*, and that action included both deliverance and a guarantee that a Flood would never occur again.

As history unfolded over time, refinements of the *divine action* explanacept occurred again and again, expanding and clarifying the understanding of God. The call to Abraham and the promise that his descendants would inherit the land inhabited by the Canaanites (Gen. 12:1–7), the argument that Abraham had with God over the number of righteous persons necessary for Sodom to avoid destruction (Gen. 18:23), Moses’ conversation with God on Mount Sinai about who was really responsible for bringing the Israelites out of Egypt (Exod. 33:1; 34:12–17)—all of these events both edified those who first heard the stories and also refined the *divine action* explanacept in the minds of the Hebrew people.

The sequence was often repeated—an event occurred, and if it was clearly not the doing of humans it was credited to *divine action*. Those who heard the account saw a little more clearly who God was and understood with greater accuracy what God did. Guided by God’s Spirit, the believing community recognized the value of these accounts and consciously decided to copy them and thus preserve them for posterity. Thus over many centuries the writings of many different authors were collected, copied, and preserved. All of

the writings that were gathered into this collection possessed a common characteristic: those who read them, or heard them read, understood a little more clearly and accurately who God was, what God did, and what God wanted for them. By increasing the understanding of God, these writings enriched the explanatory *divine action*. In short, they were inspiring and recognized as “inspired,” and were therefore authoritative. Centuries later they became “canonical.”

INSPIRATION IS AS INSPIRATION DOES

While we still have not come up with a precise description or definition of inspiration, we may have arrived at a better understanding of how inspiration has functioned—how “God-inspired” documents made an impact, accomplished their purposes, and were deemed valuable enough to be preserved. If, in the judgment of believing communities over hundreds of years, certain writings enhanced the knowledge of God in those who read them (or heard them read), those writings were copied over and over. Because they were copied, they were available to rabbis in the late first century CE to study, argue about, and ultimately include in the Hebrew Bible—the first part of the Christian Bible.

But perplexing questions remain. Even if it is granted that inspired Scripture consists of writings that clarified and enhanced the *divine action* explanation, how is it that the God who is described as directly responsible for the genocidal Deluge shares the pages of the Bible with the God whom Jesus of Nazareth knew as his heavenly Father—the God who “loved the world in such a way that he gave his unique Son so that everyone who trusts him may not perish but have eternal

life” (John 3:16, authors’ translation)? If this is the ultimate, defining instance of *divine action*, how can *divine action* also include the Great Flood?

The answer to this perfectly reasonable question lies in recognizing that the Bible is not actually a book at all, but a library of documents written (and collected) over hundreds of years. The community that decided whether or not to copy and preserve a specific document lived at a particular time and occupied a particular place. The decision by that community was based on whether its *divine action* explanation—the understanding of “God’s action” that was characteristic of that time and place—was made clearer and more relevant by the writings that were available to members of that community. If *at that time and place* a document represented an advance in the collective understanding of *divine action*, it was preserved for future reference. In that way, especially valuable writings were accumulated over time into the library that is our Bible. This is not to say that these decisions were necessarily made consciously and formally by something like a committee vote. The decision process may well have been more like an intuitive consensus, a general awareness that was powerful because it was pervasive.

Perhaps it is now appropriate to advance a tentative explanation of why the accounts of the Great Flood have become part of Holy Scripture despite their depiction of a God who said, “I will blot out from the face of the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them” (Gen. 6:7). For that time and that place, an account of a God who interacted with humans to warn them of impending catastrophe, who “remembered Noah and all the animals that were with him in the ark” (Gen. 8:1), and who guaranteed the survival of the human race, represented a significant advance in

the *divine action* explanacept for *that time* and *that place*.

Anyone who reads the Hebrew Bible carefully will recognize that in the years following the Great Flood, the Hebrew understanding of *divine action* underwent further refinement. The fact that, according to our way of thinking, for much of this time the *divine action* explanacept needed significant improvement is not the point. The relevant message from these early times, and extending up to and including the coming of the Messiah, is that those accounts, whether of the Great Flood or other events, clarified for their hearers who God was, what God did, and what God wanted for them.

TRANSLATORS AND TRANSLATIONS

If this was how “God-inspired” writings functioned for our symbolic friend Moshe through the many Biblical centuries, what is their significance to our other friend, Ian Michael, who lives in the “developed world” of the twenty-first century? He cannot read or speak, much less *think*, Biblical Hebrew, the language in which the Hebrew Bible was written. He must rely on a translation and hence on one or more translators. Because of this inescapable process that the Hebrew text (unintelligible to Ian Michael) must undergo in order to become English, Ian Michael’s *divine action* explanacept is inevitably dependent on the explanacept expressed in the translation(s) he reads. And these translations convey the *translators’* understanding of who God is, what God does, and what God wants for us.

This may come as a surprise, because the process of translation doesn’t seem that complicated. Doesn’t the translator read the words in the source language (Hebrew) and write down their equivalents in the target language (English)? Of course, it might

be necessary to make some adjustments to accommodate literary convention or difference in the semantic range of particular words; but with these minor modifications, isn't the process of translation relatively straightforward? Unfortunately, no. Even assuming that the version Ian Michael reads is the result of excellent workmanship by the translator(s), it may not accurately communicate the developing understanding of *divine action* through the centuries as reflected in the original Hebrew. In fact, the translation may even have “updated” the *divine action* explanacept into modern times by incorporating subsequent information and understanding provided by Jesus Christ, the ultimate revelation of God. Although the result might be an interesting formulation of a current theological perspective, it would not be the actual Holy Bible.

Clearly, the picture of God that was the best available at the time the narrative of the Flood was first composed is the only proper picture for a faithful-to-its-source translation to convey in that portion of the Biblical “library.” All so-called literal translations, and even the majority of paraphrased Bibles, generally convey to Ian Michael the steady enhancement of the *divine action* explanacept that is documented in the Hebrew Bible.

Ian Michael sometimes recognizes that what the Flood narrative says about God and *divine action* is very much a work in progress. Unfortunately, thanks again to translators who are trying to be helpful, he does not often accord the Biblical narrative the same sophistication in regard to *natural regularities*.⁴ Unconsciously he often supposes that Moshe's understanding of nature is similar to his own, not realizing

4. We use the common but problematic term *laws of nature* to refer to the regularities of the natural order—*natural regularities*. In this sense, the word *law* is purely descriptive rather than causative or regulative. Isaac

that Moshe did not have a concept of *natural events* that were separate and distinct from *divine actions*. Ian Michael typically does not realize that what we now understand as the operation of the laws of nature Moshe understood as God acting “directly”—not God acting through nature.

So Ian Michael frequently undertakes the Sisyphean task of placing the Biblical narrative of the Flood on a firm scientific foundation, built on an awareness of *natural regularities*. This misguided project is unfortunately encouraged by translations that render Genesis into modern English in a way that reflects a modern scientific understanding of these *natural regularities*. In so doing, these translations have unintentionally encouraged the science/religion controversy that has raged for several hundred years.

To illustrate this dynamic, we refer once more to the *land* covered by the Great Flood. Translated into English, the Hebrew word *'erets* usually becomes *land* in most of the Old Testament; occasionally it is translated “country.” In the early chapters of Genesis, however, it almost always becomes *earth*, because of an assumed cosmological context pervading Genesis 1–11. In the narrative of the Great Flood, all the English translations of which we are aware (other than our own OHV), render *'erets* as “earth,” as in this example: “The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered” (Gen. 7:19). When English readers encounter “earth” here and elsewhere in the context of the Great Flood, they almost inevitably picture the planet Earth, because Earth is the name of our planet. Indeed, some claim that the Bible

Newton’s law of universal gravitation does not make anything happen; it simply describes what in fact happens. This is in contrast to governmental laws, such as traffic laws and tax laws, which are intended specifically to initiate or control certain kinds of action.

says that the Flood was “global” in extent. But a description of Moshe’s *’erets* as covered by water could not possibly have meant a *global* flood, for the very obvious reason that Moshe did not know there was such an object as a planetary globe, much less that he lived on one.

Ian Michael often recognizes the developing explanacept *divine action* as a very understandable and reasonable result of the process by which the library that is our Bible came into existence. But, ironically, because of translators trying to make the Biblical text immediately meaningful to him,⁵ he has great difficulty in recognizing Moshe’s actual understanding of the Great Flood. Translators seldom if ever update Moshe’s *divine action* explanacept from that which is presented in the narrative of the Great Flood; they faithfully report God’s acceptance of responsibility for history’s greatest genocide. But they have consistently updated the “land” that Moshe knew to the “earth” that Ian Michael knows as his home in a vast universe.

And yet, despite the foibles of translators and translations, after thousands of years the Old Testament text rendered into English still *inspires*. As we read it, our understanding of *divine action* is enlarged and enhanced. Every time we truly listen to the inspired words, we learn more about who God is, what God does, and what God wants for us. We experience God’s presence, and experiencing that presence inspires us.

5. For example, the International Standard Version (1995–2014) begins with a description not of Moshe’s world of sky (*shamayim*) and land (*’erets*) protected from the primeval waters (*Tehom*) by a dome or vault (*raqia'*), but of Ian Michael’s modern cosmos: “In the beginning, God created the universe” (Gen. 1:1, ISV), with the traditional reading “the heavens and the earth” consigned to a footnote that interprets the text as referring to “space and matter,” in spite of the ancient Hebrews’ well-known aversion to conceptual abstraction.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GLOBAL FLOOD OR LOCAL?

IT ALL COMES BACK TO '*ERETS*'

It is worthwhile to contemplate how radically different the narrative of the Great Flood would have been for Ian Michael if as a child he had been told that “all flesh died that moved on the *land*—birds, farm animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the *land*, and all human beings” (Gen. 7:21, OHV). If the English translation he reads as an adult reassured him that God had promised that he would never again destroy the *land*, the same *land* that had been created in the beginning when “God named the dry ground *land*” (Gen. 1:10, OHV), the story of the Deluge would have been an entirely different narrative. Relying on the evidence that the Flood covered all of the *land* (which is all the evidence Scripture provides), Ian Michael would never have envisioned a global Flood—a shell of water, held in place by gravity, surrounding and inundating an immense spherical planet. So how is it that we now argue about whether the Great Flood was global or local?

All translations are interpretations. No matter how scrupulous the translator(s), a translation does not—indeed, *cannot*—perfectly reproduce the precise meaning of the original text. The reason for this imprecision is inherent in the fact that in no two languages do corresponding words have exactly the same semantic range—that is, the same range of usage, and therefore the same range of meaning. (In every language, meaning is determined by usage.) One of the most memorable linguistic blunders in English literature is recorded in the nineteenth-century children's classic, *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll: “‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’” Humpty Dumpty couldn't have been more wrong. And authors and translators have never had any more control over the meanings of words, either in the original language or in the receptor language, than did Humpty Dumpty.

So all translators of Scripture interpret the text they are translating; they have no choice in the matter, because it is intrinsic to the nature of their enterprise. Thus, unfortunately, to some extent translation always alters and sometimes obscures the meaning of the text, even if only slightly. What translators give us is their best interpretation of what *they heard* the ancient Biblical text saying *to them*; and we in turn interpret what *they say they heard* and are saying *to us*. Thus when someone announces with conviction, “The Bible says . . . ,” implying, “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it,” that person is almost always ignoring a double linguistic challenge. To read and hear Scripture accurately in translation, it is necessary to take account of *both* the original authors' preconceptions and perspectives and the preconceptions *and* perspectives of the translators of the version at hand.

The enormous literary and theological influence of the KJV for the past four hundred years is compounded by the properly conservative approach of subsequent translators (who want their products to be read comfortably by people who are familiar with earlier versions). So, Ian Michael's understanding of Scripture is profoundly influenced by his favorite translation, which has in turn been profoundly influenced by prior translations. This is why, in seminary, prospective pastors are typically required to undertake a diligent study of Biblical Hebrew and Greek so that they will be better equipped to expound what the Bible really says.

While the influence of translations can be detected throughout the Old Testament, it is especially apparent in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. As we have already seen, translators, in rendering this portion of the Hebrew text into English, have consistently chosen to translate the common Hebrew word *'erets* in a way which, we are convinced, is very misleading. It is so misleading, in fact, that the choice can only be described as fateful for Ian Michael and the rest of us moderns. Ever since William Tyndale translated the Old Testament directly from Hebrew into English for the first time in 1530, *'erets* has almost always been rendered as “earth” at the start of the Creation narrative (“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” [Gen. 1:1]),¹ and also in the Flood narrative (“The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains were covered” [Gen. 7:19]).² We are convinced that it

1. The only exceptions we have encountered are the Good News Translation (1992) and the International Standard Version (1995–2014), which replace the familiar “the heavens and the earth” with “the universe.” This is even more misleading, because there is no evidence whatsoever that the ancient Hebrews conceptualized anything remotely resembling the modern idea of the universe.

2. The only translation we have encountered that reads “land” is

should have been translated as “land” not only at the start of the Creation narrative but consistently throughout the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Had Tyndale or those who translated the King James Version in 1611 simply chosen “sky and land” instead of “heavens and earth” (as we think they should have), readers ever since would have understood the narratives of Creation and the Flood very differently and far more accurately.

THE MISCHIEF OF THE MISTRANSLATION OF 'ERETS EXTENDS FAR BEYOND THE FLOOD

At this point someone might well ask, “What’s the big deal? Why is the choice between *land* and *earth* so important? After all, isn’t Genesis describing how the earth, the solar system, and the whole universe came into existence? Why *shouldn’t* the text start out by summarizing what it is about to elucidate?” This is precisely the point. For this is *not* what the text is doing; rather, it is what the choice of “earth” rather than “land” has *made* the text do.

The original Genesis could not have described planet Earth, the solar system of which it is a part, and the universe beyond—nor could Moshe’s Genesis have referred to a “global” Flood. That the earth is a planetary sphere within a heliocentric system that is in turn a minuscule part of a vast

the Tree of Life Version (Messianic Jewish Family Bible Society, 2015). The Orthodox Jewish Bible (Artists for Israel International, 2002–2011) transliterates the Hebrew as *ha'aretz*. Several versions do not translate *'erets* at all: Contemporary English Version (1995), Easy to Read Version (Bible League International, 2006), Good News Translation (American Bible Society, 1992), *International Children's Bible* (Tommy Nelson, 1986–2015), *The Living Bible* (Tyndale, 1971), New Century Version (Thomas Nelson, 2005), *The Voice* (Ecclesia Bible Society, 2012).

universe would not be known by any human being for yet another two thousand years. But—and here is the crux of the matter—this mental picture (or at least a large portion of it) was common knowledge to those who translated Genesis from Hebrew into English. Certainly from the King James Version onward, all English translators have had a cosmological picture that has incorporated most of these elements.

According to the authoritative *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*,³ translators have properly translated 'erets as "land" throughout the Old Testament except in those cases where it occurs in a "cosmological sense." But to translate 'erets as "earth" is to *create a cosmological sense* for the word 'erets and for its context. Furthermore, the translation of 'erets as "earth" in its first occurrence in Scripture establishes a cosmological sense—a context that ensures that all subsequent occurrences of 'erets in Genesis 1:1–11:27 (including the Flood narrative), wherever grammatically possible, will be rendered in English not as "land" but as "earth."

The "cosmological sense" created by rendering the very first 'erets as "earth" would have left Moshe totally nonplussed. In his world there was nothing that Ian Michael would understand as "cosmological"—no solar system with planets circling the sun, no Milky Way galaxy with more than a hundred billion stars, no universe encompassing a hundred billion galaxies (or more). In Moshe's world there was only the "sky" (*shamayim*) that was visible above, the "land" ('erets) on which lived all the people he was aware of. For Moshe, the sky was the underside of the *raqia'*, because that was how the sacred scrolls defined it: "God called the dome (*raqia'*) sky (*shamayim*)" (Gen. 1:8). God had set

³ Jan Bergman and Magnus Ottosson, "'erets," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 393–405.

the sun, the moon, and the stars in this dome (Gen. 1:17). As far as Moshe knew, above the *raqia'*, there was only limitless water (v. 7). Moshe probably envisioned those limitless waters as still shrouded in pre-Creation darkness.

Modern translators, whose brains contain a cosmological sense they cannot eliminate, typically and understandably, although incorrectly, apparently read the original Genesis text as answering their own cosmological questions. They evidently assume, perhaps unconsciously, that Genesis was intended to provide cosmologically informative details answering modern “scientific” questions—but, ironically, it is a situation that they have created by translating *'erets* as “earth.” By making Genesis 1:1–11:27 “relevant” and talking of things in which Ian Michael is interested, translators have ensured that Genesis appears to be answering modern questions. Such questions necessarily come from mental constructs that Moshe could not have possessed. There is no evidence whatsoever that anyone in Moshe’s world had a conception of *natural order*—what we call “the laws of nature,” regularities that have been probed and explicated by modern science.

Because these are the only translations readily available, upon opening an English Bible most readers of Genesis are drawn into a (modern) cosmological context, for they immediately and repetitively read of “the earth” and take it as self-evident that what is meant is planet Earth on which they live and about whose physical (that is, scientific) origins they are understandably curious. Thus Genesis has been made to talk about the sun—not as the “greater light” designated by God to light up the “land” and “rule the day” (Gen. 1:16), but as a cosmological element, a sphere in empty space, the gravitational center of a solar system. This has occurred because in Genesis 1:1 the word *'erets* has been translated with one English word,

“earth,” rather than another English word, “land.” Only with the story of Abraham that begins in the last few verses of Genesis 11 does the modern “cosmological enchantment” lose its power and the process of translation take on a more realistic rendering of *'erets*. Moshe would have approved of this change. After all, it was his “land” that had been misappropriated, and it was his story that was being (unintentionally) misrepresented.

We have already noted the linguistic reality that in no two languages (especially languages that are as far removed historically and culturally as Biblical Hebrew and modern English) do corresponding words convey exactly the same range of meaning. Thus, inescapably, the process of translation entails choices on the part of the translator. And because translation is the work of fallible human beings, the choices are not always the best (i.e., “correct”) ones. Like all other literary processes and products, all translations are influenced by their cultural contexts as well as the individual abilities and affinities of the translators. But with ongoing study and reflection, past inadequacies can be remedied to some extent, so that current and future understandings can be improved.

BACK TO MOSHE’S WORLD?

This chapter requires a consideration of whether or not, at this late date, we can know exactly what Moshe’s “cosmological sense” was. In fact, we can’t—but we can be quite certain what it could *not* have been. Unfortunately, what it could not have been is what modern translators have routinely pictured when thinking about Creation and the Great Flood. This is apparently the case because the set of explanatory concepts with which they (and we) now work includes the one additional category not

possessed by Moshe but intimately involved in modern thinking. *Natural regularities* have, for the past several hundred years, characterized the thinking of those who have translated Genesis into English. Upon the walls of the minds of the translators now hang pictures of the spacecraft Eagle descending to the surface of the moon, of planet Earth as a “cloud-swathed, blue sphere” hanging in the blackness of empty space, and of a vast array of images from the Hubble telescope.

Moshe’s world had no telescopes or spacecraft. Moshe’s mind lacked the explanatory category *natural process*. What we today call “nature,” what we Christians understand God to be doing indirectly—at “one step removed”—as the Creator of nature, Moshe understood as what God did directly. The land on which he lived was over-arched by a *raqia'* in which God had *set* the sun, the moon, and the stars. God saw to it that the *raqia'* kept the oceans above the heavens from inundating the land (except, of course, during the Great Flood). That was a reality that was radically different from ours; it was devoid of *natural processes* such as a rotating planet revolving around the sun, to say nothing of innumerable galaxies and stars at distances astronomically far removed.

Things might have turned out very different if Tyndale and those who followed him had utilized Moshe’s Ancient Near Eastern worldview instead of their own modern Western cosmology when translating the very first Biblical *'erets* (Gen. 1:1), and instead had opted for, “In the beginning God created the sky and the land.” Moshe’s understanding of material reality included nothing other than “sky,” “land,” and the primeval waters above the sky and beneath the land.

For the translators of the Bible into English, however, a planet named Earth has been the only possibility once they assumed that *'erets* was being employed in a modern cosmological sense.

The translators did not realize that it was *their own cosmology* that they were picturing and superimposing upon Genesis—a cosmology vastly different from Moshe's. While we cannot be certain of the reasons why Tyndale chose to translate 'erets as “earth,” it seems quite possible that he meant to imply an immense spherical body surrounded by a spherical shell, a “firmament.” That “firmament” would have been, in turn, surrounded by additional shells extending outward. That this was the understanding of his German contemporary, Martin Luther, is indicated both by Luther's own descriptive statements in disagreement with Copernicus⁴ and from the picture of an earth surrounded by a firmament that he authorized to illustrate his German translation of the Bible.⁵

In Tyndale's day, “earth” could mean soil, dirt, or foundational material on which a garden could be cultivated or a house built. But, in the appropriate setting, though it did not yet mean *planet* Earth, it could mean the spherical body on which humans lived, a body appropriately situated by God at the center of physical reality. By the time the KJV was produced, “earth” employed in a cosmological sense now referred to planet Earth. It was still the home of mankind but now had been demoted. It was no longer the center of everything. Thanks to Copernicus and Galileo, it was understood (by those who studied such matters) to not even be fixed in space but to endlessly circle the sun.

Thus English versions of the Bible have led readers into visualizing something that Moshe and his contemporaries knew nothing about. Translators seem to forget that they are translating

4. Martin Luther, *Tischreden*, 22:2260; quoted in Jerome J. Langford, *Galileo, Science, and the Church*, 3rd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 35.

5. Benedict Taschen, *The Bible in Pictures: Illustrations from the Workshop of Lucas Cranach (1534)* (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2009), cover.

texts that were not addressed to them or their world—texts that consequently could not answer questions that were first framed centuries after Moshe’s era. Whatever their reasons for so doing, they have continued to render *’erets* as “earth,” leading readers to envision something cosmologically anachronistic. A narrative that starts, “To begin with, God brought into existence the sky and the land” (Gen 1:1)⁶ is a radically different account from a narrative that commences with, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” And that is only the first of many occasions in Genesis 1:1–11:27 where *’erets* translated as “earth” rather than “land” is almost certain to mislead an English reader into envisioning realities that were inaccessible to Moshe.

Once the first *’erets* in Genesis 1:1 was rendered as “earth,” the cosmological sense was created. As the subsequent narratives in Genesis unfolded in that context, “earth” became the default setting; now the entire text was permeated by a modern cosmological sense. Further occurrences of *’erets* were translated in the same way, confirming the impression that, indeed, the ancient text of Genesis was talking about planet Earth rather than the “land.” This led in Genesis 6–9 to the idea (which again would have been incomprehensible to Moshe) that the Great Flood was a “global” catastrophe—an idea that was literally inconceivable until humans became aware that they lived on an immense globe. Moshe could not have differentiated between a “global” and a “local” Flood for the straightforward reason that for Moshe, “global” was an incomprehensible idea. It is comprehensible only to those who know that the earth has the shape of a globe. That conception awaited the insights of Greek philosophers many centuries after Moshe.

Many contentious (and interminable) discussions have been generated by the injudicious translation of the one Hebrew

6. Bull and Guy, *God, Sky and Land*, 20.

word, *'erets*. These discussions have involved such issues as whether the basic matter of the earth was created along with the universe at an indefinite time (perhaps billions of years) in the past and organized for life only recently (Old Earth, Young Life Creationism), or whether the earth was created to sustain life a long time ago, was later destroyed and subsequently re-created in the relatively recent past (Ruin and Restoration), or whether both the earth and the universe were created simultaneously a few thousand years ago (Young Earth Creationism), or whether the universe began billions of years ago, subsequently producing the solar system, its planet Earth, life, and humankind (Evolutionary Creationism), or whether some variation or combination of any of these is the optimal description of what has actually happened. The necessary ground—the starting point—for all of these discussions is the (seriously misleading) translation of *'erets* as “earth” rather than “land.” Tyndale’s initial linguistic decision, which may have seemed minor at the time, turned out to be enormously influential. We still wrestle with the consequences.

WE ARE ALL READING OVER MOSHE’S SHOULDER

In this book we have considered in detail the Genesis narrative of the Flood and God’s role in it—a role that initially looked like *punishment* but turned out to be *preservation*. As part of our consideration we have come to see the narrative as not originally intended for us but for Moshe. It is available for our thoughtful reflection because Moshe preserved it. He did this because it enlarged and deepened his understanding of who God is, what God does, and what God wants for all human beings. The narrative will do the same for us, provided we take

it for what it is—early *theology*—and read it for what it tells us about God and God’s relation to us—rather than reading it as *science* or *history* and expecting it to provide empirical detail sufficiently precise to undergird a scientifically credible Flood model in the twenty-first century.

According to the Biblical narrative of the Great Flood, a vulnerable God cares about human behavior because that behavior has profound consequences for good or ill. And God does not let humanity simply “stew in its own juice.” When the situation gets desperate enough to precipitate an unprecedented catastrophe, God comes to the rescue, so that the ultimate outcome of human history is not *nothing*—that is, humanity’s self-annihilation—but continuing interaction with infinitely creative love. To the extent that Noah functions as a symbol of humanity, the permanently good news is that God remembered and preserved him and all who were with him in the ark. This is what our twenty-first-century Christian ears hear in the story of *God, Land, and the Great Flood*.

AFTERWORD

IAN MICHAEL'S FLOOD IS NOT MOSHE'S FLOOD

How would Ian Michael perceive the Great Flood if he were transported back in time and witnessed it as it occurred? Of course, this question makes the impossible assumption (what philosophers sometimes call a “contrary-to-fact conditional”) that Ian Michael *could be* such an observer. But even if transported back in time, Ian Michael would still view the epochal event with a mind operating with the modern explanatory concept *natural regularities*—for that is the way his mind works; that is the way all our modern and postmodern Western minds work. Furthermore, if Ian Michael is also a serious and thoughtful Christian, he will arrive back at the scene of the Flood equipped with an understanding of God and God’s actions based largely on the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Ian Michael lives, thinks, and understands reality in the context of a twenty-first-century world, and he can pretend otherwise only by diligent intellectual effort. When he reads about the Great Flood in Genesis, he has no choice but to picture the scenes he is reading about with a twenty-first-century

mind. As we have said before, His mind immediately and inevitably assumes that a catastrophic flood necessarily involves overwhelming forces of nature. Consequently, he immediately wants answers to concerns such as, “The water must have *come from somewhere*, and when the Flood was over, it must have *gone somewhere*.” Granted that God was involved, natural forces—which is to say, *natural regularities*—must *also* have been involved; what were those forces, and how did they operate? If Ian Michael is a geologist, hydrologist, or some similar kind of expert, he has even more detailed questions because he wants to build an intellectually coherent model of the Flood, and in that way understand more clearly the (*natural*) forces that brought it about and the (*natural*) effects that it left behind.

For Ian Michael a purely *theological understanding* of the narrative is out of the question. Even while witnessing it as it occurs, he cannot see it as an event that God “engineers” directly—the way Moshe visualized it. As we have noted, Moshe had no choice in the matter either. No one in his time could think otherwise until the concept of *nature* gradually emerged with the rise of science. It began, perhaps, with the ancient Greeks and—encouraged by the Biblical idea of an ordered and orderly creation, in which material reality is regarded as dependent but real and good¹—burst into full bloom with the so-called scientific revolution four hundred years ago.

In this book we have explored what the Biblical narrative of the Great Flood likely meant (and, more often, what it *could not possibly have meant*) to Moshe and his contemporaries. Our goal has been to take the reader back into Moshe’s cultural and intellectual world and hear the original story through Moshe’s

1. See, for example, Langdon B. Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth: The Christian Doctrine of Creation in the Light of Modern Knowledge* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday/Anchor, 1965), 58–66.

ears. In short, we have attempted to “retro-translate” the text (strip it of twenty-first-century understandings of “*natural regularities*”) and explore its meaning as if we were Moshe’s contemporaries, hearing it along with him.

Although we take the Biblical narrative with utmost seriousness, we are not Moshe’s contemporaries. The narrative of the Flood involved unimaginably large quantities of water, drowning all animal and most plant life, maybe reshaping whole continents. Reading the Biblical narrative in this day and age, we easily forget that in the millennia since Moshe we have acquired and instinctively utilize the additional explanacept of *natural regularities*. We intuitively categorize any flood, great or small, as an event in the realm of nature, and we frame scientific questions about it. We can’t suppress these questions, and we shouldn’t try to do so. But we must be aware that these questions, because they anticipate “scientific” answers, are *our* modern, culturally conditioned questions. We should not expect (much less demand) that the Biblical text address them. To do so would be not only to misunderstand but also to disrespect the actual text.

A further characteristic of our time and thought processes is that when we raise questions about perplexing natural events, we want answers that are not only theologically credible (pointing to the ultimate meaning, if any, of such events), but also scientifically credible (making sense in the light of modern knowledge about the nature of reality). From a two-explanacept world where events such as rain, children, famine, etc., were satisfactorily understood *theologically* (as “divine actions”), we now live in a world where natural events are understood scientifically as the result of “*natural regularities*.” What would Ian Michael have made of the Great Flood if, indeed, he had been there to witness it firsthand?

WHAT PROBABLY HAPPENED DURING THE GREAT FLOOD

Stories of a Great Flood played a very significant role in the Ancient Near East. Such narratives were the common property of virtually all of the nations that surrounded and interacted with Israel. Other than the Old Testament witness that is so familiar, most of the accounts to which we still have access have been recovered from the royal libraries of the Assyrians, Sumerians, Babylonians, Chaldeans, and Egyptians. These peoples and others fought over “the land between the rivers” and the “fertile crescent” for more than a thousand years—and their successors are still fighting over the same lands today. Flood stories, mostly composed in Akkadian and inscribed in cuneiform on clay tablets, were part of the “founding documents” and cultural heritage of these peoples. No self-respecting ancient Near Eastern potentate would consider his library complete without one or more accounts of the Great Flood.

The earliest references to devastating floods are in texts written earlier than 2000 BCE, but it is not always clear that the events they describe were more than unusually severe and extensive local events.² In the royal libraries of the Old Babylonian Kingdom (*ca.* 1900–1600 BCE), however, the stories describe an event of epic magnitude.³ Here the flood was not simply one more in a series of periodic inundations; it was in a different category entirely. This event was far more than an event of local history; it divided time itself into “before” and “after.” The Great Flood separated primeval time from normal, everyday time. Before that extraordinary event, men, usually kings, were

2. Y. S. Chen, *The Primeval Flood Catastrophe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5.

3. *Ibid.*, 6–11.

larger than life; they performed heroic deeds and lived long and eventful lives. They fought monsters in epic battles and usually came out the victors. Other stories of this primeval time tell of men of supra-human wisdom and god-like powers. But then came the Great Flood, and humankind survived only in the person of one exceptional man and his offspring.

With the Flood, primeval time came to an end. The inhabitants of the post-Flood world were more normal-sized, and the deeds they performed were likewise more normal-sized. Time proceeded at a normal pace, and lifespans shortened to a more normal number of years. Despite the different portrayals of deity in the two Israelite accounts that were combined into the Biblical narrative, it is clear that the Great Flood served a somewhat similar function in Hebrew culture: it divided time into “before” and “after.”

Was there an actual event involving immense amounts of water covering large regions of land, with great loss of human and animal life and a changed world thereafter? The answer is almost certainly Yes, and there is a very plausible candidate. As the ice sheets of the last ice age melted, ocean levels rose between three hundred and four hundred feet.⁴ That this happened around the world probably accounts, at least partially, for the fact that stories of a catastrophic deluge originated on every continent, and not a few islands as well. We know that this sea-level rise happened relatively recently because of archeological remains in places where humans lived and worked that are now deep under sea water.

An example is the Cosquer cave on the Mediterranean coast of France. Its entrance is now 121 feet below the surface of the sea and can only be accessed by Scuba divers (several of whom have died in the attempt). The cave is decorated with beautiful

4. Ian Wilson, *Before the Flood* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), 7.

paintings of horses and monkeys, and outlines of human hands.⁵ Some images appear to be of creatures now extinct. The human-hand outlines and some portions of the painted animals were produced by what looks very much like a spray-painting technique. It is thought that the artist had the pigment—usually a brightly hued iron oxide—in his mouth and then blew it over a human hand pressed tightly against the cave wall. The cave and its surroundings have been thoroughly explored, and no other entrances can be identified. Scholars are therefore virtually certain that the cave paintings come from a time when sea levels were much lower. In those times the cave could be accessed by simply walking into the entrance on dry land and climbing to the room when the paintings were made.

Several large tracts of land elsewhere on the shoreline of the Mediterranean Sea were flooded by that same sea-level rise. The inundation covered the land under what is now the northern half of the Adriatic Sea. At the same time, on the southern shore of the Mediterranean a large tract of land adjoining the coast of present-day Tunisia was swamped.⁶ In both of these locations a substantial amount of land disappeared under water—35,000 square miles, an area roughly the size of the modern state of Jordan.

The Book of Genesis, however, seems to locate the Garden of Eden not adjoining the Mediterranean but farther east at the northern end of the Persian Gulf. Here a similar-sized region disappeared beneath the rising sea. In the second creation story, four Eden-associated rivers are mentioned by name (Gen. 2:10–14), and two of these, the Tigris and the Euphrates, are readily

5. Jean Clottes and Jean Courtin, *The Cave Beneath the Sea: Paleolithic Images at Cosquer* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996).

6. Tjeerd H. van Andel, “Late Quaternary Sea-Level Changes and Archeology,” *Antiquity* 63, no. 241 (1989), 736, 737.

identifiable today. Both flow into the northern end of the Persian Gulf. Infrared satellite imagery has identified other, now extinct, rivers that would have joined the Tigris/Euphrates in the central portion of the now-flooded region at the Persian Gulf's northern end. Prior to the sea-level rise, that area of the Gulf would have likely been a highly fertile, well-watered valley running down to the ocean. There is every reason to believe that it would have been at least as fertile as the higher land in the Mesopotamian valley to the north that is still above sea level. This, the present-day region of Kuwait and southern Iraq, archeologically shows a very rapid increase in human settlements around 6000 BCE, a time period that coincides with the final stages of sea-level rise.⁷

Another tantalizing item in the Genesis text is also illuminated by Near Eastern archeology. We read that the inhabitants of post-Flood Mesopotamia intended to construct “a tower with its top in the heavens” (Gen. 11:4), probably to serve as a refuge in the event of a future flood. Archeological evidence indicates that when these ziggurats were constructed in the Mesopotamian valley north of the Persian Gulf, they were approximately three hundred feet tall.⁸

There are, of course, other candidates for the location of the Great Flood that covered all of the *land* known to those who experienced the event and recorded it for posterity. An alternative to all of the above suggested locations is the proposal that the event remembered with such horror was the breaching of the Bosphorus by the Mediterranean Sea and the subsequent flooding of the Black Sea basin.⁹ As a result of the same post–ice age rise in ocean levels, this Black Sea event would have occurred

7. Ibid., 737.

8. George Andrew, “The Tower of Babel: Archaeology, History and Cuneiform Texts,” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 51 (2005), 75–95.

9. Ryan and Pitman, *Noah’s Flood*, 232–235.

at about the same time as the flooding of the Persian Gulf and the inundation of northeast Tunisia and the northwest Adriatic. Wherever the actual sites, the inhabitants could no longer “go home again” after the Great Flood. Though vague and uncertain, a memory of their original home in a happier time persisted.

It is true that post-glacial rises in ocean levels were not rapid and would have required hundreds or thousands of years. However, the East Asian tsunami in 2004, plus Hurricane Katrina, with its accompanying storm surge of more than twenty-five feet in 2005, have dramatically demonstrated that low-lying land can be rapidly and totally devastated by what we readily recognize as *natural* events. A huge, prehistoric undersea landslide (840 cubic miles of debris) known as the Storegga Slide is thought to have played a role in a final episode that separated England from the mainland of Europe several thousand years ago. The tsunami that was precipitated by that landslide destroyed human settlements on what was then the North Sea Plain. This event has been thoroughly investigated and extensively modeled because of the fear that further drilling for oil off the Norwegian coast might precipitate another such incident.¹⁰

We must remember that the people who experienced the Great Flood did not know of *natural* events, and they most certainly were not attempting to model large hydrological disasters. Since the catastrophe was clearly not caused by humans, their conclusion was that it must have been brought about by God. That was the only other explanatory category available, and the only way Moshe and his contemporaries could come to terms with the unprecedented catastrophe of the Great Flood.

¹⁰. For a brief description, see “Landslides in the sea,” British Geological Survey, www.bgs.ac.uk/discoveringGeology/hazards/landslides/sea.html, accessed Nov. 30, 2016.

IS THERE “FLOOD GEOLOGY”?

The geological column is the sequence of rock layers (strata) found in many places worldwide. Its upper levels contain plant and animal fossils. The geological column is not mentioned in Genesis or anywhere else in the Bible. It was not, and could not have been, recognized as a reality in the realm of *nature* until after the rise of geological science in the early nineteenth century. The idea of a global Flood, however, comes up frequently in discussions of the Genesis narrative because of the belief that the worldwide geological column is the result of a global Flood.

The logic here is impeccable except for one problem: as lawyers would say, it “assumes facts not in evidence.” It is certainly true that the Great Flood had to be global if the geological column is global—if the geological column is the result of the Flood. It is at this point that the English translators’ choice of a word to communicate the sense of the Hebrew word ‘*erets* is critical. This is the Hebrew word that underlies “earth” in the familiar texts, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1, NIV) and “As the waters increased they lifted the ark high above the earth” (Gen. 7:17, NIV). The word ‘*erets* can certainly mean “earth” in the sense of territory or land or fertile soil. However, the Flood narrative in Genesis cannot be referring to planet Earth. As we have established, Moshe knew only of the *land* that was fixed in its place by God. What moved was the sun—as Moshe could plainly see—certainly not Moshe’s beloved and stationary *land*. Thus for Moshe, the Genesis account affirmed only that the Flood covered all the *land* he knew about, including the mountains, and that it killed all the humans and animals except those God saved in the ark. The term *global Flood* would have made no sense whatever.

As the term is now commonly used, flood geology rests

on a Hebrew-into-English translation that is misleading in the twenty-first century because it can instantly morph from soil or territory into a planet held by gravity in its orbit. In virtually all contexts, the English word *earth* now evokes a mental picture far different from anything that Moshe could conceive of. These anachronistic mental pictures are the origin of “Flood geology.”

Ascribing planet-wide geological phenomena to a Great Flood because of the Genesis account of a Flood that covered the whole *land* has not been justifiable for more than two hundred years. “Flood geology” is thus without Biblical underpinnings and must stand or fall on scientific grounds alone. Even if, as presently seems highly unlikely, the geological column could be shown to be the result of a water-inundated globe, it would still not prove the Genesis account true, for that is not what the Genesis account is about. Here Ian Michael, reading Genesis over Moshe’s shoulder, needs to remember that he is, indeed, reading something like a forwarded e-mail message. That being the case, he must begin his effort to understand the message of the Flood narrative by first finding out what it said to Moshe.

THE ONGOING CONVERSATION BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Science and religion have been talking to each other ever since science blossomed as a discipline in the early seventeenth century. The nature of this conversation has varied through the years. Sometimes it has been quite civil and productive, sometimes not. All too often, when civility has been lacking, the topic of conversation has been the “scientific validity” of the Genesis accounts of Creation and the Great Flood.

A distinguishing characteristic of humanness is our

fundamental need to explain things—first to ourselves as “understanding” and then to others as “explanation.” We want explanations for everything that exists and every event that happens. The desired understandings and explanations are of two kinds: we want to know the processes by which things come to be what they are and by which events occur; and we want to know the purposes and values of things and events. In other words, we want to know both fundamental causes and ultimate meanings. So we have the intellectual projects of science and theology. Given this complementary sibling relationship, science and theology should really get along better. They have much to learn from each other—if they will listen.

Consciously reading Genesis over Moshe’s shoulder in the twenty-first-century is undeniably difficult. We hope that our exploration of some of these difficulties will foster charity on the part of scientifically knowledgeable readers as well as those who are more comfortable in theological discussions. Such an increase in charity, coupled with a realization of the mischief wrought by the misleading translation of *'erets* as “earth” rather than as “land,” will go far toward restoring civility to the potentially productive conversation between these two sibling disciplines.

Another factor that will facilitate productive conversation is the recognition by its practitioners of the limitations of each discipline. This is a situation where the ambiguous proverb, “Good fences make good neighbors” can be a helpful pointer in the right direction. Too many readers of the Bible expect—even demand—that the sacred text function as a source of infallible information on all topics of possible interest—including, and specifically, scientific ones. The reality, however, is that one ought to go to the Bible for its spiritual and theological wisdom, for its insights into life’s ultimate questions. As the

New Testament puts it, the sacred writings are intended and effective “to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus,” and “for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every [kind of] good work” (2 Tim. 3:15–17). The purpose and function of Scripture is not to instruct its hearers and readers in geology, paleontology, or cosmology, any more than ophthalmology or nuclear medicine. The purpose and function of Scripture is to give insight into the meaning of our existence by revealing who God is, what God does, and what God wants for us.

By respecting each other’s boundaries, science and religion can encourage each other to concentrate on, and thus to excel in, their respective fields. In that way, they can contribute positively to each other. One thing that religion and theology can learn from science is the value of an understanding that is ever advancing. That science advances constantly is universally assumed; the equal importance of religious and theological advance is widely unrecognized or ignored. Worse, it is often actively denied.

A BENEDICTION

Finally, we want to conclude with a relevant hymn by Thomas H. Troeger (b. 1945):¹¹

Praise the Source of faith and learning that has
sparked and stoked the mind

11. Thomas Troeger, “Praise the Source of Faith and Learning,” (c) Oxford University Press Inc., 1986. Assigned to Oxford University Press 2010. Reproduced by permission of CopyCat Music Licensing, LLC, obo Oxford University Press. All rights reserved.

with a passion for discerning how the world
has been designed.

Let the sense of wonder flowing from the
wonders we survey
keep our faith forever growing and renew our
need to pray.

God of wisdom, we acknowledge that our
science and our art
and the breadth of human knowledge only
partial truth impart.

Far beyond our calculation lies a depth we
cannot sound
where your purpose for creation and the pulse
of life are found.

May our faith redeem the blunder of believing
that our thought
has displaced the grounds for wonder which
the ancient prophets taught.

May our learning curb the error which
unthinking faith can breed
lest we justify some terror with an antiquated
creed.

As two currents in a river fight each other's
undertow

Till converging they deliver one coherent
steady flow,
Blend, O God, our faith and learning till they
carve a single course,
till they join as one, returning praise and thanks

to you, their Source.

Praise for minds to probe the heavens, praise
for strength to breathe the air,
praise for all that beauty leavens, praise for
silence, music, prayer.

Praise for justice and compassion, and for
strangers, neighbors, friends,
praise for hearts and lips to fashion praise for
love that never ends.

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